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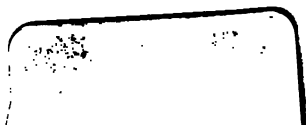
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R U T H.

CHAPTER I.

MR. BRADSHAW had been successful in carrying his point. His member had been returned; his proud opponents mortified. So the public thought he ought to be well pleased; but the public were disappointed to see that he did not show any of the gratification they supposed him to feel.

The truth was, that he had met with so many small mortifications during the progress of the election, that the pleasure which he would otherwise have felt in the final success of his scheme was much diminished.

He had more than tacitly sanctioned bribery; and

now that the excitement was over, he regretted it; not entirely from conscientious motives, though he was uneasy from a slight sense of wrong-doing; but he was more pained, after all, to think that, in the eyes of some of his townsmen, his hitherto spotless character had received a blemish. He, who had been so stern and severe a censor on the undue influence exercised by the opposite party in all preceding elections, could not expect to be spared by their adherents now, when there were rumours that the hands of the scrupulous Dissenters were not clean. Before, it had been his boast that neither friend nor enemy could say one word against him; now, he was constantly afraid of an indictment for bribery, and of being compelled to appear before a Committee to swear to his own share in the business.

His uneasy, fearful consciousness made him stricter and sterner than ever; as if he would quench all wondering, slanderous talk about him in the town by a renewed austerity of uprightness; that the slack-principled Mr. Bradshaw of one

month of ferment and excitement, might not be confounded with the highly-conscientious and deeply-religious Mr. Bradshaw, who went to chapel twice a day, and gave a hundred pounds a-piece to every charity in the town, as a sort of thank-offering that his end was gained.

But he was secretly dissatisfied with Mr. Donne. In general, that gentleman had been rather too willing to act in accordance with any one's advice, no matter whose; as if he had thought it too much trouble to weigh the wisdom of his friends, in which case Mr. Bradshaw's would have, doubtless, proved the most valuable. But now and then he unexpectedly, and utterly without reason, took the conduct of affairs into his own hands, as when he had been absent without leave only just before the day of nomination. No one guessed whither he had gone; but the fact of his being gone was enough to chagrin Mr. Bradshaw, who was quite ready to have picked a quarrel on this very head, if the election had not terminated favourably. As it

was, he had a feeling of proprietorship in Mr. Donne which was not disagreeable. He had given the new M.P. his seat; his resolution, his promptitude, his energy, had made Mr. Donne "our member;" and Mr. Bradshaw began to feel proud of him accordingly. But there had been no one circumstance during this period to bind Jemima and Mr. Farquhar together. They were still misunderstanding each other with all their power. The difference in the result was this. Jemima loved him all the more, in spite of quarrels and coolness. He was growing utterly weary of the petulant temper of which he was never certain; of the reception which varied day after day, according to the mood she was in and the thoughts that were uppermost; and he was almost startled to find how very glad he was that the little girls and Mrs. Denbigh were coming home. His was a character to bask in peace; and lovely, quiet Ruth, with her low tones and soft replies, her delicate waving movements, appeared to him the very type of what a

woman should be—a calm, serene soul, fashioning the body to angelic grace.

It was, therefore, with no slight interest that Mr. Farquhar inquired daily after the health of little Leonard. He asked at the Bensons' house; and Sally answered him, with swollen and tearful eyes, that the child was very bad—very bad indeed. He asked at the doctor's; and the doctor told him, in a few short words, that “it was only a bad kind of measles, and that the lad might have a struggle for it, but he thought he would get through. Vigorous children carried their force into everything; never did things by halves; if they were ill, they were sure to be in a high fever directly; if they were well, there was no peace in the house for their rioting. For his part,” continued the doctor, “he thought he was glad he had had no children; as far as he could judge, they were pretty much all plague and no profit.” But as he ended his speech he sighed; and Mr. Farquhar was none the less convinced that common report was true, which re-

presented the clever, prosperous surgeon of Eccleston as bitterly disappointed at his failure of offspring.

While these various interests and feelings had their course outside the Chapel-house, within there was but one thought which possessed all the inmates. When Sally was not cooking for the little invalid, she was crying; for she had had a dream about green rushes, not three months ago, which, by some queer process of oneiromancy, she interpreted to mean the death of a child; and all Miss Benson's endeavours were directed to making her keep silence to Ruth about this dream. Sally thought that the mother ought to be told; what were dreams sent for but for warnings; but it was just like a pack of Dissenters, who would not believe anything like other folks. Miss Benson was too much accustomed to Sally's contempt for Dissenters, as viewed from the pinnacle of the Establishment, to pay much attention to all this grumbling; especially as Sally was willing to take as much trouble about

Leonard as if she believed he was going to live, and that his recovery depended upon her care. Miss Benson's great object was to keep her from having any confidential talks with Ruth ; as if any repetition of the dream could have deepened the conviction in Ruth's mind that the child would die.

It seemed to her that his death would only be the fitting punishment for the state of indifference towards him—towards life and death—towards all things earthly or divine, into which she had suffered herself to fall since her last interview with Mr. Donne. She did not understand that such exhaustion is but the natural consequence of violent agitation and severe tension of feeling. The only relief she experienced was in constantly serving Leonard ; she had almost an animal's jealousy lest any one should come between her and her young. Mr. Benson saw this jealous suspicion, although he could hardly understand it ; but he calmed his sister's wonder and officious kindness, so that the two

patiently and quietly provided all that Ruth might want, but did not interfere with her right to nurse Leonard. But when he was recovering, Mr. Benson, with the slight tone of authority he knew how to assume when need was, bade Ruth lie down and take some rest, while his sister watched. Ruth did not answer, but obeyed in a dull, weary kind of surprise at being so commanded. She lay down by her child, gazing her fill at his calm slumber, and as she gazed, her large white eyelids were softly pressed down as with a gentle irresistible weight, and she fell asleep.

She dreamed that she was once more on the lonely shore, striving to carry Leonard away from some pursuer—some human pursuer—she knew he was human, and she knew who he was, although she dared not say his name even to herself, he seemed so close and present, gaining on her flying footsteps, rushing after her as with the sound of the roaring tide. Her feet seemed heavy weights fixed to the ground; they would not move. All at once, just

near the shore, a great black whirlwind of waves clutched her back to her pursuer ; she threw Leonard on to land, which was safety ; but whether he reached it or no, or was swept back like her into a mysterious something too dreadful to be borne, she did not know, for the terror awakened her. At first the dream seemed yet a reality, and she thought that the pursuer was couched even there, in that very room, and the great boom of the sea was still in her ears. But as full consciousness returned, she saw herself safe in the dear old room—the haven of rest—the shelter from storms. A bright fire was glowing in the little old-fashioned, cup-shaped grate, niched into a corner of the wall, and guarded on either side by whitewashed bricks, which served for hobs. On one of these the kettle hummed and buzzed, within two points of boiling whenever she or Leonard required tea. In her dream that home-like sound had been the roaring of the relentless sea, creeping swiftly on to seize its prey. Miss Benson sat by the fire, motionless and still ; it was too dark

to read any longer without a candle ; but yet on the ceiling and upper part of the walls the golden light of the setting sun was slowly moving—so slow, and yet a motion gives the feeling of rest to the weary yet more than perfect stillness. The old clock on the staircase told its monotonous click-clack, in that soothing way which more marked the quiet of the house than disturbed with any sense of sound. Leonard still slept that renovating slumber, almost in her arms, far from that fatal pursuing sea, with its human form of cruelty. The dream was a vision ; the reality which prompted the dream was over and past—Leonard was safe—she was safe ; all this loosened the frozen springs, and they gushed forth in her heart, and her lips moved in accordance with her thoughts.

“ What were you saying, my darling ? ” said Miss Benson, who caught sight of the motion, and fancied she was asking for something. Miss Benson bent over the side of the bed on which Ruth lay, to catch the low tones of her voice.



"I only said," replied Ruth, timidly, "thank God! I have so much to thank Him for, you don't know."


"My dear, I am sure we have all of us cause to be thankful that our boy is spared. See! he is wakening up; and we will have a cup of tea together."

Leonard strode on to perfect health; but he was made older in character and looks by his severe illness. He grew tall and thin, and the lovely child was lost in the handsome boy. He began to wonder, and to question. Ruth mourned a little over the vanished babyhood, when she was all in all, and over the childhood, whose petals had fallen away; it seemed as though two of her children were gone—the one an infant, the other a bright thoughtless darling; and she wished that they could have remained quick in her memory for ever, instead of being absorbed in loving pride for the present boy. But these were only fanciful regrets, flitting like shadows across a mirror. Peace and

thankfulness were once more the atmosphere of her mind; nor was her unconsciousness disturbed by any suspicion of Mr. Farquhar's increasing approbation and admiration, which he was diligently nursing up into love for her. She knew that he had sent—she did not know how often he had brought—fruit for the convalescent Leonard. She heard, on her return from her daily employment, that Mr. Farquhar had brought a little gentle pon on which Leonard, weak as he was, might ride. To confess the truth, her maternal pride was such that she thought that all kindness shown to such a boy as Leonard was but natural; she believed him to be

A child whom all that looked on, loved.

As in truth he was; and the proof of this was daily shown in many kind inquiries, and many thoughtful little offerings, besides Mr. Farquhar's. The poor (warm and kind of heart to all sorrow common to humanity) were touched with pity for the young



widow, whose only child lay ill, and nigh unto death. They brought what they could—a fresh egg, when eggs were scarce—a few ripe pears that grew on the sunniest side of the humble cottage, where the fruit was regarded as a source of income—a call of inquiry, and a prayer that God would spare the child, from an old crippled woman, who could scarcely drag herself so far as the Chapel-house, yet felt her worn and weary heart stirred with a sharp pang of sympathy, and a very present remembrance of the time when she too was young, and saw the life-breath quiver out of her child, now an angel in that heaven, which felt more like home to the desolate old creature than this empty earth. To all such, when Leonard was better, Ruth went, and thanked them from her heart. She and the old cripple sat hand in hand over the scanty fire on the hearth of the latter, while she told in solemn, broken, homely words, how her child sickened and died. Tears fell like rain down Ruth's cheeks; but those of the old woman were dry. All tears had


been wept out of her long ago, and now she sat patient and quiet, waiting for death. But after this, Ruth "clave unto her," and the two were henceforward a pair of friends. Mr. Farquhar was only included in the general gratitude which she felt towards all who had been kind to her boy.

The winter passed away in deep peace after the storms of the autumn, yet every now and then a feeling of insecurity made Ruth shake for an instant. Those wild autumnal storms had torn aside the quiet flowers and herbage that had gathered over the wreck of her early life, and shown her that all deeds, however hidden, and long passed by, have their eternal consequences. She turned sick and faint whenever Mr. Donne's name was casually mentioned. No one saw it; but she felt the miserable stop in her heart's beating, and wished that she could prevent it by any exercise of self-command. She had never named his identity with Mr. Bellingham, nor had she spoken about the sea-side interview. Deep shame made her silent and

reserved on all her life before Leonard's birth ; from that time she rose again in her self-respect, and spoke as openly as a child (when need was) of all occurrences which had taken place since then ; except that she could not, and would not, tell of this mocking echo, this haunting phantom, this past, that would not rest in its grave. The very circumstance that it was stalking abroad in the world, and might re-appear at any moment, made her a coward : she trembled away from contemplating what the reality had been ; only she clung more faithfully than before to the thought of the great God, who was a rock in the dreary land, where no shadow was.

Autumn and winter, with their lowering skies, were less dreary than the woeful, desolate feelings that shed a gloom on Jemima. She found too late that she had considered Mr. Farquhar so securely her own for so long a time, that her heart refused to recognise him as lost to her, unless her reason went through the same weary, convincing, miser-

able evidence day after day, and hour after hour. He never spoke to her now, except from common civility. He never cared for her contradictions; he never tried, with patient perseverance, to bring her over to his opinions; he never used the wonted wiles (so tenderly remembered now they had no existence but in memory) to bring her round out of some wilful mood—and such moods were common enough now! Frequently she was sullenly indifferent to the feelings of others—not from any unkindness, but because her heart seemed numb and stony, and incapable of sympathy. Then afterwards her self-reproach was terrible—in the dead of night, when no one saw it. With a strange perversity, the only intelligence she cared to hear, the only sights she cared to see, were the circumstances which gave confirmation to the idea that Mr. Farquhar was thinking of Ruth for a wife. She craved with stinging curiosity to hear something of their affairs every day; partly because the torture




which such intelligence gave was almost a relief from the deadness of her heart to all other interests.

And so spring (*gioventù dell'anno*) came back to her, bringing all the contrasts which spring alone can bring to add to the heaviness of the soul. The little winged creatures filled the air with bursts of joy; the vegetation came bright and hopefully onwards, without any check of nipping frost. The ash-trees in the Bradshaws' garden were out in leaf by the middle of May, which that year wore more the aspect of summer than most Junes do. The sunny weather mocked Jemima, and the unusual warmth oppressed her physical powers. She felt very weak and languid: she was acutely sensible that no one else noticed her want of strength; father, mother, all seemed too full of other things to care if, as she believed, her life was waning. She herself felt glad that it was so. But her delicacy was not unnoticed by all. Her mother often anxiously asked her husband if he did not think

Jemima was looking ill; nor did his affirmation to the contrary satisfy her, as most of his affirmations did. She thought every morning, before she got up, how she could tempt Jemima to eat, by ordering some favourite dainty for dinner; in many other little ways she tried to minister to her child; but the poor girl's own abrupt irritability of temper had made her mother afraid of openly speaking to her about her health.

Ruth, too, saw that Jemima was not looking well. How she had become an object of dislike to her former friend she did not know; but she was sensible that Miss Bradshaw disliked her now. She was not aware that this feeling was growing and strengthening almost into repugnance, for she seldom saw Jemima out of school-hours, and then only for a minute or two. But the evil element of a fellow-creature's dislike oppressed the atmosphere of her life. That fellow-creature was one who had once loved her so fondly, and whom she still loved, although she had learnt to fear her, as we fear those



whose faces cloud over when we come in sight—who cast unloving glances at us, of which we, though not seeing, are conscious, as of some occult influence ; and the cause of whose dislike is unknown to us, though every word and action seems to increase it. I believe that this sort of dislike is only shown by the jealous, and that it renders the disliker even more miserable, because more continually conscious than the object ; but the growing evidences of Jemima's feeling made Ruth very unhappy at times. This very May, too, an idea had come into her mind, which she had tried to repress—namely, that Mr. Farquhar was in love with her. It annoyed her extremely ; it made her reproach herself that she ever should think such a thing possible. She tried to strangle the notion, to drown it, to starve it out by neglect—its existence caused her such pain and distress.

The worst was, he had won Leonard's heart, who was constantly seeking him out ; or, when absent, talking about him. The best was some journey


connected with business, which would take him to the continent for several weeks ; and, during that time, surely this disagreeable fancy of his would die away, if untrue ; and if true, some way would be opened by which she might put a stop to all increase of predilection on his part, and yet retain him as a friend for Leonard—that darling for whom she was far-seeing and covetous, and miserly of every scrap of love and kindly regard.

Mr. Farquhar would not have been flattered if he had known how much his departure contributed to Ruth's rest of mind on the Saturday afternoon on which he set out on his journey. It was a beautiful day ; the sky of that intense quivering blue which seemed as though you could look through it for ever, yet not reach the black, infinite space which is suggested as lying beyond. Now and then a thin, torn, vaporous cloud floated slowly within the vaulted depth ; but the soft air that gently wafted it was not perceptible among the leaves on the trees, which did not even tremble. Ruth sat

at her work in the shadow formed by the old grey garden wall ; Miss Benson and Sally—the one in the parlour window-seat mending stockings, the other hard at work in her kitchen—were both within talking distance, for it was weather for open doors and windows; but none of the three kept up any continued conversation; and in the intervals Ruth sang low a brooding song, such as she remembered her mother singing long ago. Now and then she stopped to look at Leonard, who was labouring away with vehement energy at digging over a small plot of ground, where he meant to prick out some celery plants that had been given to him. Ruth's heart warmed at the earnest, spirited way in which he thrust his large spade deep down into the brown soil, his ruddy face glowing, his curly hair wet with the exertion; and yet she sighed to think that the days were over when her deeds of skill could give him pleasure. Now, his delight was in acting himself; last year, not fourteen months ago, he had watched her making a daisy-chain for him, as if he could

not admire her cleverness enough; this year—this week, when she had been devoting every spare hour to the simple tailoring which she performed for her boy (she had always made every article he wore, and felt almost jealous of the employment), he had come to her with a wistful look, and asked when he might begin to have clothes made by a man?

Ever since the Wednesday when she had accompanied Mary and Elizabeth, at Mrs. Bradshaw's desire, to be measured for spring clothes by the new Eccleston dressmaker, she had been looking forward to this Saturday afternoon's pleasure of making summer trousers for Leonard; but the satisfaction of the employment was a little taken away by Leonard's speech. It was a sign, however, that her life was very quiet and peaceful that she had leisure to think upon the thing at all; and often she forgot it entirely in her low, chanting song, or in listening to the thrush warbling out his afternoon ditty to his patient mate in the holly-bush below.



The distant rumble of carts through the busy streets (it was market-day) not only formed a low rolling bass to the nearer and pleasanter sounds, but enhanced the sense of peace by the suggestion of the contrast afforded to the repose of the garden by the bustle not far off.

But besides physical din and bustle there is mental strife and turmoil.

That afternoon, as Jemima was restlessly wandering about the house, her mother desired her to go on an errand to Mrs. Pearson's, the new dressmaker, in order to give some directions about her sisters' new frocks. Jemima went, rather than have the trouble of resisting ; or else she would have preferred staying at home, moving or being outwardly quiet according to her own fitful will. Mrs. Bradshaw, who, as I have said, had been aware for some time that something was wrong with her daughter, and was very anxious to set it to rights if she only knew how, had rather planned this errand with a view to dispel Jemima's melancholy.

"And Minnie, dear," said her mother, "when you are there, look out for a new bonnet for yourself; she has got some very pretty ones, and your old one is so shabby."

"It does for me, mother," said Jemima, heavily.

"I don't want a new bonnet."

"But I want you to have one, my lassie. I want my girl to look well and nice."

There was something of homely tenderness in Mrs. Bradshaw's tone that touched Jemima's heart. She went to her mother, and kissed her with more of affection than she had shown to any one for weeks before; and the kiss was returned with warm fondness.

"I think you love me, mother," said Jemima.

"We all love you, dear, if you would but think so. And if you want anything, or wish for anything, only tell me, and with a little patience I can get your father to give it you, I know. Only be happy, there's a good girl."

"Be happy! as if one could by an effort of

will!" thought Jemima, as she went along the street, too absorbed in herself to notice the bows of acquaintances and friends, but instinctively guiding herself right among the throng and press of carts, and gigs, and market people in High-street.

But her mother's tones and looks, with their comforting power, remained longer in her recollection than the inconsistency of any words spoken. When she had completed her errand about the frocks, she asked to look at some bonnets, in order to show her recognition of her mother's kind thought.

Mrs. Pearson was a smart, clever-looking woman of five or six and thirty. She had all the variety of small-talk at her finger ends that was formerly needed by barbers to amuse the people who came to be shaved. She had admired the town till Jemima was weary of its praises, sick and oppressed by its sameness, as she had been these many weeks.

"Here are some bonnets, ma'am, that will be just the thing for you—elegant and tasty, yet quite of

the simple style, suitable to young ladies. Oblige me by trying on this white silk !”

Jemima looked at herself in the glass ; she was obliged to own it was very becoming, and perhaps not the less so for the flush of modest shame which came into her cheeks as she heard Mrs. Pearson’s open praises of the “ rich, beautiful hair,” and the “ Oriental eyes ” of the wearer.

“ I induced the young lady who accompanied your sisters the other day—the governess, is she, ma’am ?”

“ Yes—Mrs. Denbigh is her name,” said Jemima, clouding over.

“ Thank you, ma’am. Well, I persuaded Mrs. Denbigh to try on that bonnet, and you can’t think how charming she looked in it ; and yet I don’t think it became her as much as it does you.”

“ Mrs. Denbigh is very beautiful,” said Jemima, taking off the bonnet, and not much inclined to try on any other.

“ Very, ma’am. Quite a peculiar style of beauty.

If I might be allowed, I should say that hers was a Grecian style of loveliness, while yours was Oriental. She reminded me of a young person I once knew in Fordham." Mrs. Pearson sighed an audible sigh.

"In Fordham!" said Jemima, remembering that Ruth had once spoken of the place as one in which she had spent some time, while the county in which it was situated was the same in which Ruth was born. "In Fordham! Why, I think Mrs. Denbigh comes from that neighbourhood."

"Oh, ma'am! she cannot be the young person I mean—I am sure, ma'am—holding the position she does in your establishment. I should hardly say I knew her myself; for I only saw her two or three times at my sister's house; but she was so remarked for her beauty, that I remember her face quite well—the more so, on account of her vicious conduct afterwards."

"Her vicious conduct!" repeated Jemima, convinced by these words that there could be no

identity between Ruth and the "young person" alluded to. "Then it could not have been our Mrs. Denbigh."

"Oh, no, ma'am! I am sure I should be sorry to be understood to have suggested anything of the kind. I beg your pardon if I did so. All I meant to say—and perhaps that was a liberty I ought not to have taken, considering what Ruth Hilton was——"

"Ruth Hilton!" said Jemima, turning suddenly round, and facing Mrs. Pearson.

"Yes, ma'am, that was the name of the young person I allude to."

"Tell me about her—what did she do?" asked Jemima, subduing her eagerness of tone and look as best she might, but trembling as on the verge of some strange discovery.

"I don't know whether I ought to tell you, ma'am—it is hardly a fit story for a young lady; but this Ruth Hilton was an apprentice to my sister-in-law, who had a first-rate business in Fordham, which brought her a good deal of patronage from the

county families ; and this young creature was very artful and bold, and thought sadly too much of her beauty ; and, somehow, she beguiled a young gentleman, who took her into keeping (I am sure, ma'am, I ought to apologise for polluting your ears——)"

"Go on," said Jemima, breathlessly.

"I don't know much more. His mother followed him into Wales. She was a lady of a great deal of religion, and of a very old family, and was much shocked at her son's misfortune in being captivated by such a person ; but she led him to repentance, and took him to Paris, where, I think, she died ; but I am not sure, for, owing to family differences, I have not been on terms for some years with my sister-in-law, who was my informant."

"Who died?" interrupted Jemima—"the young man's mother, or—or Ruth Hilton?"

"Oh dear, ma'am! pray don't confuse the two. It was the mother, Mrs. —— I forget the name—something like Billington. It was the lady who died."

"And what became of the other?" asked Jemima, unable, as her dark suspicion seemed thickening, to speak the name.

"The girl? Why, ma'am, what could become of her? Not that I know exactly—only one knows they can but go from bad to worse, poor creatures! God forgive me, if I am speaking too transiently of such degraded women, who, after all, are a disgrace to our sex."

"Then you know nothing more about her?" asked Jemima.

"I did hear that she had gone off with another gentleman that she met with in Wales, but I'm sure I can't tell who told me."

There was a little pause. Jemima was pondering on all she had heard. Suddenly she felt that Mrs. Pearson's eyes were upon her, watching her; not with curiosity, but with a newly-awakened intelligence;—and yet she must ask one more question; but she tried to ask it in an indifferent, careless tone, handling the bonnet while she spoke.

"How long is it since all this—all you have been telling me about—happened?" (Leonard was eight years old.)

"Why—let me see. It was before I was married, and I was married three years, and poor dear Pearson has been deceased five—I should say, going on for nine years this summer. Blush roses would become your complexion, perhaps, better than these lilacs," said she, as with superficial observation she watched Jemima, turning the bonnet round and round on her hand—the bonnet that her dizzy eyes did not see.

"Thank you. It is very pretty. But I don't want a bonnet. I beg your pardon for taking up your time." And with an abrupt bow to the discomfited Mrs. Pearson, she was out and away in the open air, threading her way with instinctive energy along the crowded street. Suddenly she turned round, and went back to Mrs. Pearson's, with even more rapidity than she had been walking away from the house.

"I have changed my mind," said she, as she came, breathless, up into the show-room. "I will take the bonnet. How much is it?"

"Allow me to change the flowers; it can be done in an instant, and then you can see if you would not prefer the roses; but with either foliage it is a lovely little bonnet," said Mrs. Pearson, holding it up admiringly on her hand.

"Oh! never mind the flowers—yes! change them to roses." And she stood by, agitated (Mrs. Pearson thought with impatience) all the time the milliner was making the alteration with skilful, busy haste.

"By the way," said Jemima, when she saw the last touches were being given, and that she must not delay executing the purpose which was the real cause of her return—"Papa, I am sure, would not like your connecting Mrs. Denbigh's name with such a—story as you have been telling me."

"Oh dear! ma'am, I have too much respect for you all to think of doing such a thing! Of course

I know, ma'am, that it is not to be cast up to any lady that she is like anybody disreputable."

"But I would rather you did not name the likeness to any one," said Jemima; "not to any one. Don't tell any one the story you have told me this morning."

"Indeed, ma'am, I should never think of such a thing! My poor husband could have borne witness that I am as close as the grave where there is anything to conceal."

"Oh dear!" said Jemima, "Mrs. Pearson, there is nothing to conceal; only you must not speak about it."

"I certainly shall not do it, ma'am; you may rest assured of me."

This time Jemima did not go towards home, but in the direction of the outskirts of the town, on the hilly side. She had some dim recollection of hearing her sisters ask if they might not go and invite Leonard and his mother to tea; and how

could she face Ruth, after the conviction had taken possession of her heart that she, and the sinful creature she had just heard of, were one and the same?

It was yet only the middle of the afternoon; the hours were early in the old-fashioned town of Eccleston. Soft white clouds had come slowly sailing up out of the west; the plain was flecked with thin floating shadows, gently borne along by the westerly wind that was waving the long grass in the hay-fields into alternate light and shade. Jemima went into one of these fields, lying by the side of the upland road. She was stunned by the shock she had received. The diver, leaving the green sward, smooth and known, where his friends stand with their familiar smiling faces, admiring his glad bravery—the diver, down in an instant in the horrid depths of the sea, close to some strange, ghastly, lidless-eyed monster, can hardly more feel his blood curdle at the near terror than did Jemima now. Two hours ago—but a point of time on her

mind's dial—she had never imagined that she should ever come in contact with any one who had committed open sin ; she had never shaped her conviction into words and sentences, but still it was *there*, that all the respectable, all the family and religious circumstances of her life, would hedge her in, and guard her from ever encountering the great shock of coming face to face with vice. Without being pharasaical in her estimation of herself, she had all a Pharisee's dread of publicans and sinners, and all a child's cowardliness—that cowardliness which prompts it to shut its eyes against the object of terror, rather than acknowledge its existence with brave faith. Her father's often reiterated speeches had not been without their effect. He drew a clear line of partition, which separated mankind into two great groups, to one of which, by the grace of God, he and his belonged ; while the other was composed of those whom it was his duty to try and reform, and bring the whole force of his morality to bear upon, with lectures, admonitions, and

exhortations—a duty to be performed, because it was a duty—but with very little of that Hope and Faith which is the Spirit that maketh alive. Jemima had rebelled against these hard doctrines of her father's, but their frequent repetition had had its effect, and led her to look upon those who had gone astray with shrinking, shuddering recoil, instead of with a pity, so Christ-like as to have both wisdom and tenderness in it.

And now she saw among her own familiar associates one, almost her house-fellow, who had been stained with that evil most repugnant to her womanly modesty, that would fain have ignored its existence altogether. She loathed the thought of meeting Ruth again. She wished that she could take her up, and put her down at a distance somewhere—anywhere—where she might never see or hear of her more ; never be reminded, as she must be whenever she saw her, that such things were, in this sunny, bright, lark-singing earth, over which the blue dome of heaven bent softly down as

Jemima sat in the hay-field that June afternoon; her cheeks flushed and red, but her lips pale and compressed, and her eyes full of a heavy, angry sorrow. It was Saturday, and the people in that part of the country left their work an hour earlier on that day. By this, Jemima knew it must be growing time for her to be at home. She had had so much of conflict in her own mind of late, that she had grown to dislike struggle, or speech, or explanation; and so strove to conform to times and hours much more than she had done in happier days. But oh! how full of hate her heart was growing against the world! And oh! how she sickened at the thought of seeing Ruth! Who was to be trusted more, if Ruth—calm, modest, delicate, dignified Ruth—had a memory blackened by sin?

As she went heavily along, the thought of Mr. Farquhar came into her mind. It showed how terrible had been the stun, that he had been forgotten until now. With the thought of him came in her first merciful feeling towards Ruth. This would

never have been, had there been the least latent suspicion in Jemima's jealous mind that Ruth had purposely done aught — looked a look — uttered a word — modulated a tone — for the sake of attracting. As Jemima recalled all the passages of their intercourse, she slowly confessed to herself how pure and simple had been all Ruth's ways in relation to Mr. Farquhar. It was not merely that there had been no coquetting, but there had been simple unconsciousness on Ruth's part, for so long a time after Jemima had discovered Mr. Farquhar's inclination for her; and when at length she had slowly awakened to some perception of the state of his feelings, there had been a modest, shrinking dignity of manner, not startled, or emotional, or even timid, but pure, grave, and quiet; and this conduct of Ruth's, Jemima instinctively acknowledged to be of necessity transparent and sincere. Now, and here, there was no hypocrisy; but some time, somewhere, on the part of somebody, what hypocrisy, what lies must have been acted, if not absolutely spoken,

before Ruth could have been received by them all as the sweet, gentle, girlish widow, which she remembered they had all believed Mrs. Denbigh to be when first she came among them. Could Mr. and Miss Benson know? Could they be a party to the deceit? Not sufficiently acquainted with the world to understand how strong had been the temptation to play the part they did, if they wished to give Ruth a chance, Jemima could not believe them guilty of such deceit as the knowledge of Mrs. Denbigh's previous conduct would imply; and yet how it darkened the latter into a treacherous hypocrite, with a black secret shut up in her soul for years—living in apparent confidence, and daily household familiarity with the Bensons for years, yet never telling the remorse that ought to be corroding her heart! Who was true? Who was not? Who was good and pure? Who was not? The very foundations of Jemima's belief in her mind were shaken.

Could it be false? Could there be two Ruth Hil-

tons. She went over every morsel of evidence. It could not be. She knew that Mrs. Denbigh's former name had been Hilton. She had heard her speak casually, but charily, of having lived in Fordham. She knew she had been in Wales but a short time before she made her appearance in Eccleston. There was no doubt of the identity. Into the middle of Jemima's pain and horror at the afternoon's discovery, there came a sense of the power which the knowledge of this secret gave her over Ruth ; but this was no relief, only an aggravation of the regret with which Jemima looked back on her state of ignorance. It was no wonder that when she arrived at home, she was so oppressed with headache that she had to go to bed directly.

“ Quiet, mother ! quiet, dear, dear mother ” (for she clung to the known and tried goodness of her mother more than ever now), “ that is all I want.” And she was left to the stillness of her darkened room, the blinds idly flapping to and fro in the soft evening breeze, and letting in the rustling sound of

the branches which waved close to her window, and the thrush's gurgling warble, and the distant hum of the busy town.


Her jealousy was gone—she knew not how or where. She might shun and recoil from Ruth, but she now thought that she could never more be jealous of her. In her pride of innocence, she felt almost ashamed that such a feeling could have had existence. Could Mr. Farquhar hesitate between her own self and one who—— No! she could not name what Ruth had been, even in thought. And yet he might never know, so fair a seeming did her rival wear. Oh! for one ray of God's holy light to know what was seeming, and what was truth in this traitorous hollow earth! It might be—she used to think such things possible, before sorrow had embittered her—that Ruth had worked her way through the deep purgatory of repentance up to something like purity again; God only knew! If her present goodness was real—if, after having striven back thus far on the heights, a fellow-woman was to throw her

down into some terrible depth with her unkind, incontinent tongue, that would be too cruel! And yet, if—there was such woeful uncertainty and deceit somewhere—if Ruth—— No! that Jemima, with noble candour, admitted was impossible. Whatever Ruth had been, she was good, and to be respected as such, now. It did not follow that Jemima was to preserve the secret always; she doubted her own power to do so, if Mr. Farquhar came home again, and were still constant in his admiration of Mrs. Denbigh, and if Mrs. Denbigh gave him any—the least encouragement. But this last she thought, from what she knew of Ruth's character, was impossible. Only, what was impossible after this afternoon's discovery? At any rate, she would watch, and wait. Come what might, Ruth was in her power. And, strange to say, this last certainty gave Jemima a kind of protecting, almost pitying, feeling for Ruth. Her horror at the wrong was not diminished; but the more she thought of the struggles that the wrong-doer must have made

to extricate herself, the more she felt how cruel it would be to baffle all by revealing what had been. But for her sisters' sake she had a duty to perform ; she must watch Ruth. For her love's sake she could not have helped watching ; but she was too much stunned to recognise the force of her love, while duty seemed the only stable thing to cling to. For the present she would neither meddle nor mar in Ruth's course of life.

CHAPTER II.

So it was that Jemima no longer avoided Ruth, nor manifested by word or look the dislike which for a long time she had been scarce concealing. Ruth could not help noticing that Jemima always sought to be in her presence while she was at Mr. Bradshaw's house ; either when daily teaching Mary and Elizabeth, or when she came as an occasional visitor with Mr. and Miss Benson, or by herself. Up to this time, Jemima had used no gentle skill to conceal the abruptness with which she would leave the room rather than that Ruth and she should be brought into contact—rather than that it should fall to her lot to entertain Ruth during any part of the evening. It was months since Jemima had left off sitting in the school-room, as had been her wont



during the first few years of Ruth's governess-ship. Now, each morning, Miss Bradshaw seated herself at a little round table in the window, at her work, or at her writing ; but whether she sewed, or wrote, or read, Ruth felt that she was always watching—watching. At first, Ruth had welcomed all these changes in habit and behaviour, as giving her a chance, she thought, by some patient waiting or some opportune show of enduring constant love, to regain her lost friend's regard ; but by-and-by, the icy chillness, immovable and grey, struck more to her heart than many sudden words of unkindness could have done. They might be attributed to the hot impulses of a hasty temper—to the vehement anger of an accuser ; but this measured manner was the conscious result of some deep-seated feeling ; this cold sternness befitted the calm implacability of some severe judge. The watching, which Ruth felt was ever upon her, made her unconsciously shiver, as you would if you saw that the passionless eyes of the dead were visibly

gazing upon you. Her very being shrivelled and parched up in Jemima's presence, as if blown upon by a bitter, keen, east wind.

Jemima bent every power she possessed upon the one object of ascertaining what Ruth really was. Sometimes the strain was very painful; the constant tension made her soul weary; and she moaned aloud, and upbraided circumstance (she dared not go higher—to the maker of circumstance) for having deprived her of her unsuspecting happy ignorance.

Things were in this state when Mr. Richard Bradshaw came on his annual home visit. He was to remain another year in London, and then to return and be admitted into the firm. After he had been a week at home, he grew tired of the monotonous regularity of his father's household, and began to complain of it to Jemima.

"I wish Farquhar were at home. Though he is such a stiff, quiet old fellow, his coming in in the evenings makes a change. What has become of

the Millses? They used to drink tea with us sometimes, formerly."

"Oh! papa and Mr. Mills took opposite sides at the election, and we have never visited since. I don't think they are any great loss."

"Anybody is a loss—the stupidest bore that ever was would be a blessing, if he only would come in sometimes."

"Mr. and Miss Benson have drank tea here twice since you came."

"Come, that's capital! Apropos of stupid bores, you talk of the Bensons. I did not think you had so much discrimination, my little sister."

Jemima looked up in surprise; and then reddened angrily.

"I never meant to say a word against Mr. or Miss Benson, and that you know quite well, Dick."

"Never mind! I won't tell tales. They are stupid old fogeys, but they are better than nobody, especially as that handsome governess of the girls always comes with them to be looked at."

There was a little pause; Richard broke it by saying:

"Do you know, Minnie, I've a notion, if she plays her cards well, she may hook Farquhar!"

"Who?" asked Jemima, shortly, though she knew quite well.

"Mrs. Denbigh, to be sure. We were talking of her, you know. Farquhar asked me to dine with him at his hotel as he passed through town, and—I'd my own reasons for going and trying to creep up his sleeve—I wanted him to tip me, as he used to do."

"For shame! Dick," burst in Jemima.

"Well! well! not tip me exactly, but lend me some money. The governor keeps me so deucedly short."

"Why! it was only yesterday, when my father was speaking about your expenses, and your allowance, I heard you say that you'd more than you knew how to spend."

"Don't you see that was the perfection of art.

If my father had thought me extravagant, he would have kept me in with a tight rein; as it is, I'm in great hopes of a handsome addition, and I can tell you it's needed. If my father had given me what I ought to have had at first, I should not have been driven to the speculations and messes I've got into."

"What speculations? What messes?" asked Jemima, with anxious eagerness.

"Oh! messes was not the right word. Speculations hardly was; for they are sure to turn out well, and then I shall surprise my father with my riches." He saw that he had gone a little too far in his confidence, and was trying to draw in.

"But, what do you mean? Do explain it to me."

"Never you trouble your head about my business, my dear. Women can't understand the share-market, and such things. Don't think I've forgotten the awful blunders you made when you tried to read the state of the money-market aloud to my father, that night when he had lost his spectacles. What were we talking of? Oh! of Farquhar and pretty Mrs.

Denbigh. Yes! I soon found out that was the subject my gentleman liked me to dwell on. He did not talk about her much himself, but his eyes sparkled when I told him what enthusiastic letters Polly and Elizabeth wrote about her. How old d'ye think she is?"

"I know!" said Jemima. "At least, I heard her age spoken about, amongst other things, when first she came. She will be five-and-twenty this autumn."

"And Farquhar is forty, if he is a day. She's young, too, to have such a boy as Leonard; younger-looking, or full as young-looking as she is! I tell you what, Minnie, she looks younger than you. How old are you? Three-and-twenty, ain't it?"

"Last March," replied Jemima.

"You'll have to make haste and pick up somebody, if you're losing your good looks at this rate. Why, Jemima, I thought you had a good chance of Farquhar a year or two ago. How come you

to have lost him? I'd far rather you'd had him than that proud, haughty Mrs. Denbigh, who flashes her great grey eyes upon me if ever I dare to pay her a compliment. She ought to think it an honour that I take that much notice of her. Besides, Farquhar is rich, and it's keeping the business of the firm in one's own family; and if he marries Mrs. Denbigh she will be sure to be wanting Leonard in when he's of age, and I won't have that. Have a try for Farquhar, Minnie! Ten to one it's not too late. I wish I'd brought you a pink bonnet down. You go about so dowdy—so careless of how you look."

"If Mr. Farquhar has not liked me as I am," said Jemima, choking, "I don't want to owe him to a pink bonnet."

"Nonsense! I don't like to have my sisters' governess stealing a march on my sister. I tell you Farquhar is worth trying for. If you'll wear the pink bonnet I'll give it you, and I'll back you against Mrs. Denbigh. I think you might have

done something with 'our member,' as my father calls him, when you had him so long in the house. But, altogether, I should like Farquhar best for a brother-in-law. By the way, have you heard down here that Donne is going to be married? I heard of it in town, just before I left, from a man that was good authority. Some Sir Thomas Campbell's seventh daughter: a girl without a penny; father ruined himself by gambling, and obliged to live abroad. But Donne is not a man to care for any obstacle, from all accounts, when once he has taken a fancy. It was love at first sight, they say. I believe he did not know of her existence a month ago."

"No! we have not heard of it," replied Jemima. "My father will like to know; tell it him;" continued she, as she was leaving the room, to be alone, in order to still her habitual agitation whenever she heard Mr. Farquhar and Ruth coupled together.

Mr. Farquhar came home the day before Richard

Bradshaw left for town. He dropped in after tea at the Bradshaws'; he was evidently disappointed to see none but the family there, and looked round whenever the door opened.

"Look! look!" said Dick to his sister. "I wanted to make sure of his coming in to-night, to save me my father's parting exhortations against the temptations of the world (as if I did not know much more of the world than he does!), so I used a spell I thought would prove efficacious; I told him that we should be by ourselves, with the exception of Mrs. Denbigh, and look how he is expecting her to come in!"

Jemima did see; did understand. She understood, too, why certain packets were put carefully on one side, apart from the rest of the purchases of Swiss toys and jewellery, by which Mr. Farquhar proved that none of Mr. Bradshaw's family had been forgotten by him during his absence. Before the end of the evening, she was very conscious that her sore heart had not forgotten

how to be jealous. Her brother did not allow a word, a look, or an incident, which might be supposed on Mr. Farquhar's side to refer to Ruth, to pass unnoticed ; he pointed out all to his sister, never dreaming of the torture he was inflicting, only anxious to prove his own extreme penetration. At length Jemima could stand it no longer, and left the room. She went into the school-room, where the shutters were not closed, as it only looked into the garden. She opened the window, to let the cool night air blow in on her hot cheeks. The clouds were hurrying over the moon's face in a tempestuous and unstable manner, making all things seem unreal ; now clear out in its bright light, now trembling and quivering in shadow. The pain at her heart seemed to make Jemima's brain grow dull ; she laid her head on her arms, which rested on the window-sill, and grew dizzy with the sick weary notion that the earth was wandering lawless and aimless through the heavens, where all seemed one tossed and whirling wrack of clouds. It was a waking night-

mare, from the uneasy heaviness of which she was thankful to be roused by Dick's entrance.

"What, you are here, are you? I have been looking everywhere for you. I wanted to ask you if you have any spare money you could lend me for a few weeks?"

"How much do you want?" asked Jemima, in a dull, hopeless voice.

"Oh! the more the better. But I should be glad of any trifle, I am kept so confoundedly short."

When Jemima returned with her little store, even her careless, selfish brother was struck by the wanness of her face, lighted by the bed-candle she carried.

"Come, Minnie, don't give it up. If I were you, I would have a good try against Mrs. Denbigh. I'll send you the bonnet as soon as ever I get back to town, and you pluck up a spirit, and I'll back you against her even yet."

It seemed to Jemima strange—and yet only a fitting part of this strange, chaotic world—to find

that her brother, who was the last person to whom she could have given her confidence in her own family, and almost the last person of her acquaintance to whom she could look for real help and sympathy, should have been the only one to hit upon the secret of her love. And the idea passed away from his mind as quickly as all ideas not bearing upon his own self-interests did.

The night, the sleepless night, was so crowded and haunted by miserable images, that she longed for day ; and when day came, with its stinging realities, she wearied and grew sick for the solitude of night. For the next week, she seemed to see and hear nothing but what confirmed the idea of Mr. Farquhar's decided attachment to Ruth. Even her mother spoke of it as a thing which was impending, and which she wondered how Mr. Bradshaw would like ; for his approval or disapproval was the standard by which she measured all things.

"Oh ! merciful God," prayed Jemima, in the dead silence of the night, "the strain is too great—

I cannot bear it longer—my life—my love—the very essence of me, which is myself through time and eternity; and on the other side there is all-pitying Charity. If she had not been what she is—if she had shown any sign of triumph—any knowledge of her prize—if she had made any effort to gain his dear heart, I must have given way long ago, and taunted her, even if I did not tell others—taunted her, even though I sank down to the pit the next moment.

“The temptation is too strong for me. Oh Lord! where is Thy peace that I believed in, in my childhood?—that I hear people speaking of now, as if it hushed up the troubles of life, and had not to be sought for—sought for, as with tears of blood!”

There was no sound nor sight in answer to this wild imploring cry, which Jemima half thought must force out a sign from Heaven. But there was a dawn stealing on through the darkness of her night.

It was glorious weather for the end of August.

The nights were as full of light as the days—everywhere, save in the low dusky meadows by the river side, where the mists rose and blended the pale sky with the lands below. Unknowing of the care and trouble around them, Mary and Elizabeth exulted in the weather, and saw some new glory in every touch of the year's decay. They were clamorous for an expedition to the hills, before the calm stillness of the autumn should be disturbed by storms. They gained permission to go on the next Wednesday—the next half-holiday. They had won their mother over to consent to a full holiday, but their father would not hear of it. Mrs. Bradshaw had proposed an early dinner, but the idea was scouted at by the girls. What would the expedition be worth if they did not carry their dinners with them in baskets? Anything out of a basket, and eaten in the open air, was worth twenty times as much as the most sumptuous meal in the house. So the baskets were packed up, while Mrs. Bradshaw wailed over probable colds to be caught from sitting

on the damp ground. Ruth and Leonard were to go; they four. Jemima had refused all invitations to make one of the party; and yet she had a half sympathy with her sisters' joy—a sort of longing, lingering look back to the time when she too would have revelled in the prospect that lay before them. They too would grow up, and suffer; though now they played, regardless of their doom.

The morning was bright and glorious; just cloud enough, as some one said, to make the distant plain look beautiful from the hills, with its floating shadows passing over the golden corn-fields. Leonard was to join them at twelve, when his lessons with Mr. Benson, and the girls' with their masters, should be over. Ruth took off her bonnet, and folded her shawl with her usual dainty, careful neatness, and laid them aside in a corner of the room to be in readiness. She tried to forget the pleasure she always anticipated from a long walk towards the hills, while the morning's work went on; but she showed enough of sympathy to make

the girls cling round her with many a caress of joyous love. Everything was beautiful in their eyes; from the shadows of the quivering leaves on the wall to the glittering beads of dew, not yet absorbed by the sun, which decked the gossamer web in the vine outside the window. Eleven o'clock struck. The Latin master went away, wondering much at the radiant faces of his pupils, and thinking that it was only very young people who could take such pleasure in the "Delectus." Ruth said, "Now, do let us try to be very steady this next hour," and Mary pulled back Ruth's head, and gave the pretty budding mouth a kiss. They sat down to work, while Mrs. Denbigh read aloud. A fresh sun-gleam burst into the room, and they looked at each other with glad, anticipating eyes.

Jemima came in, ostensibly to seek for a book, but really from that sort of restless weariness of any one place or employment, which had taken possession of her since Mr. Farquhar's return. She stood before the bookcase in the recess, languidly passing

over the titles in search of the one she wanted. Ruth's voice lost a tone or two of its peacefulness, and her eyes looked more dim and anxious at Jerimima's presence. She wondered in her heart if she dared to ask Miss Bradshaw to accompany them in their expedition. Eighteen months ago she would have urged it on her friend with soft, loving entreaty; now she was afraid even to propose it as a hard possibility, everything she did or said was taken so wrongly—seemed to add to the old dislike, or the later stony contempt with which Miss Bradshaw had regarded her. While they were in this way Mr. Bradshaw came into the room. His entrance—his being at home at all at this time—was so unusual a thing, that the reading was instantly stopped; and all four involuntarily looked at him, as if expecting some explanation of his unusual proceeding.

His face was almost purple with suppressed agitation.

“ Mary and Elizabeth, leave the room. Don't

stay to pack up your books. Leave the room, I say!" He spoke with trembling anger, and the frightened girls obeyed without a word. A cloud passing over the sun, cast a cold gloom into the room which was late so bright and beaming; but, by equalising the light, it took away the dark shadow from the place where Jemima had been standing, and her figure caught her father's eye.

"Leave the room, Jemima," said he.

"Why, father?" replied she, in an opposition that was strange even to herself, but which was prompted by the sullen passion which seethed below the stagnant surface of her life, and which sought a vent in defiance. She maintained her ground, facing round upon her father, and Ruth—Ruth, who had risen, and stood trembling, shaking, a lightning-fear having shown her the precipice on which she stood. It was of no use; no quiet, innocent life—no profound silence, even to her own heart as to the Past; the old offence could never be drowned in the Deep; but thus, when all was calm on the great, broad, sunny

sea, it rose to the surface, and faced her with its unclosed eyes, and its ghastly countenance. The blood bubbled up to her brain, and made such a sound there, as of boiling waters, that she did not hear the words which Mr. Bradshaw first spoke; indeed, his speech was broken and disjointed by intense passion. But she needed not to hear; she knew. As she rose up at first, so she stood now—numb and helpless. When her ears heard again (as if the sounds were drawing nearer, and becoming more distinct, from some faint, vague distance of space), Mr. Bradshaw was saying, “If there be one sin I hate—I utterly loathe—more than all others, it is wantonness. It includes all other sins. It is but of a piece that you should have come with your sickly, hypocritical face, imposing upon us all. I trust Benson did not know of it—for his own sake, I trust not. Before God, if he got you into my house on false pretences, he shall find his charity at other men’s expense shall cost him dear—you—the common talk of Eccleston for your

profligacy——” He was absolutely choked by his boiling indignation. Ruth stood speechless, motionless. Her head drooped a little forward, her eyes were more than half veiled by the large quivering lids, her arms hung down straight and heavy. At last she heaved the weight off her heart enough to say, in a faint, moaning voice, speaking with infinite difficulty:

“ I was so young.”

“ The more depraved, the more disgusting you,” Mr. Bradshaw exclaimed, almost glad that the woman, unresisting so long, should now begin to resist. But to his surprise (for in his anger he had forgotten her presence) Jemima moved forwards, and said, “ Father!”

“ You hold your tongue, Jemima. You have grown more and more insolent—more and more disobedient every day. I now know who to thank for it. When such a woman came into my family there is no wonder at any corruption—any evil—any defilement——”

“Father!”

“Not a word! If, in your disobedience, you choose to stay and hear what no modest young woman would put herself in the way of hearing, you shall be silent when I bid you. The only good you can gain is in the way of warning. Look at that woman” (indicating Ruth, who moved her drooping head a little on one side, as if by such motion she could avert the pitiless pointing—her face growing whiter and whiter still every instant)—“look at that woman, I say—corrupt long before she was your age—hypocrite for years! If ever you, or any child of mine, cared for her, shake her off from you, as St. Paul shook off the viper—even into the fire.” He stopped for very want of breath. Jemima, all flushed and panting, went up and stood side by side with wan Ruth. She took the cold, dead hand which hung next to her in her warm convulsive grasp, and, holding it so tight, that it was blue and discoloured for days, she spoke out beyond all power of restraint from her father.

“ Father ! I will speak. I will not keep silence. I will bear witness to Ruth. I have hated her—so keenly, may God forgive me ! but you may know, from that, that my witness is true. I have hated her, and my hatred was only quenched into contempt—not contempt now, dear Ruth—dear Ruth”—(this was spoken with infinite softness and tenderness, and in spite of her father’s fierce eyes and passionate gesture)—“ I heard what you have learnt now, father, weeks and weeks ago—a year it may be, all time of late has been so long ; and I shuddered up from her and from her sin ; and I might have spoken of it, and told it there and then, if I had not been afraid that it was from no good motive I should act in so doing, but to gain a way to the desire of my own jealous heart. Yes, father, to show you what a witness I am for Ruth, I will own that I was stabbed to the heart with jealousy ; some one—some one cared for Ruth that—oh, father ! spare me saying all.” Her face was double-dyed with crimson blushes, and she paused for one moment—no more.

"I watched her, and I watched her with my wild-beast eyes. If I had seen one paltering with duty—if I had witnessed one flickering shadow of untruth in word or action—if, more than all things, my woman's instinct had ever been conscious of the faintest speck of impurity in thought, or word, or look, my old hate would have flamed out with the flame of hell! my contempt would have turned to loathing disgust, instead of my being full of pity, and the stirrings of new-awakened love, and most true respect. Father, I have borne my witness!"

"And I will tell you how much your witness is worth," said her father, beginning low, that his pent-up wrath might have room to swell out. "It only convinces me more and more how deep is the corruption this wanton has spread in my family. She has come amongst us with her innocent seeming, and spread her nets well and skilfully. She has turned right into wrong, and wrong into right, and taught you all to be uncertain whether there be any such thing as Vice in the world, or whether

it ought not to be looked upon as virtue. She has led you to the brink of the deep pit, ready for the first chance circumstance to push you in. And I trusted her—I trusted her—I welcomed her.”

“I have done very wrong,” murmured Ruth, but so low, that perhaps he did not hear her, for he went on, lashing himself up.

“I welcomed her. I was duped into allowing her bastard—(I sicken at the thought of it)——”

At the mention of Leonard, Ruth lifted up her eyes for the first time since the conversation began, the pupils dilating, as if she were just becoming aware of some new agony in store for her. I have seen such a look of terror on a poor dumb animal's countenance, and once or twice on human faces. I pray I may never see it again on either! Jemima felt the hand she held in her strong grasp writhe itself free. Ruth spread her arms before her, clasping and lacing her fingers together, her head thrown a little back, as if in intensest suffering.

Mr. Bradshaw went on:

“That very child and heir of shame to associate

with my own innocent children! I trust they are not contaminated."

"I cannot bear it—I cannot bear it," were the words wrung out of Ruth.

"Cannot bear it! cannot bear it!" he repeated. "You must bear it, madam. Do you suppose your child is to be exempt from the penalties of his birth? Do you suppose that he alone is to be saved from the upbraiding scoff? Do you suppose that he is ever to rank with other boys, who are not stained and marked with sin from their birth? Every creature in Eccleston may know what he is, do you think they will spare him their scorn? 'Cannot bear it,' indeed! Before you went into your sin, you should have thought whether you could bear the consequences or not—have had some idea how far your offspring would be degraded and scouted, till the best thing that could happen to him would be for him to be lost to all sense of shame, dead to all knowledge of guilt, for his mother's sake."

Ruth spoke out. She stood like a wild creature

at bay, past fear now. "I appeal to God against such a doom for my child. I appeal to God to help me. I am a mother, and as such I cry to God for help—for help to keep my boy in His pitying sight, and to bring him up in His holy fear. Let the shame fall on me! I have deserved it, but he—he is so innocent and good."

Ruth had caught up her shawl, and was tying on her bonnet with her trembling hands. What if Leonard was hearing of her shame from common report? What would be the mysterious shock of the intelligence? She must face him, and see the look in his eyes, before she knew whether he recoiled from her; he might have his heart turned to hate her, by their cruel jeers.

Jemima stood by, dumb and pitying. Her sorrow was past her power. She helped in arranging the dress, with one or two gentle touches, which were hardly felt by Ruth, but which called out all Mr. Bradshaw's ire afresh; he absolutely took her by the shoulders and turned her by force out of the

room. In the hall, and along the stairs, her passionate woeful crying was heard. The sound only concentrated Mr. Bradshaw's anger on Ruth. He held the street door open wide; and said, between his teeth, "If ever you, or your bastard, darken this door again, I will have you both turned out by the police."

He needed not have added this, if he had seen Ruth's face.

CHAPTER III.

As Ruth went along the accustomed streets, every sight and every sound seemed to bear a new meaning, and each and all to have some reference to her boy's disgrace. She held her head down, and scudded along dizzy with fear, lest some word should have told him what she had been, and what he was, before she could reach him. It was a wild unreasoning fear, but it took hold of her as strongly as if it had been well founded. And, indeed, the secret whispered by Mrs. Pearson, whose curiosity and suspicion had been excited by Jemima's manner, and confirmed since by many a little corroborating circumstance, had spread abroad, and was known to most of the gossips in Eccleston before it reached Mr. Bradshaw's ears.


As Ruth came up to the door of the Chapel-house, it was opened, and Leonard came out, bright and hopeful as the morning, his face radiant at the prospect of the happy day before him. He was dressed in the clothes it had been such a pleasant pride to her to make for him. He had the dark blue ribbon tied round his neck that she had left out for him that very morning, with a smiling thought of how it would set off his brown handsome face. She caught him by the hand as they met, and turned him, with his face homewards, without a word. Her looks, her rushing movement, her silence, awed him; and although he wondered, he did not stay to ask why she did so. The door was on the latch; she opened it, and only said, "Up-stairs," in a hoarse whisper. Up they went into her own room. She drew him in, and bolted the door; and then, sitting down, she placed him (she had never let go of him) before her, holding him with her hands on each of his shoulders, and gazing into his face with a woeful look of the agony that could not find vent in words. At

last she tried to speak; she tried with strong bodily effort, almost amounting to convulsion. But the words would not come; it was not till she saw the absolute terror depicted on his face that she found utterance; and then the sight of that terror changed the words from what she meant them to have been. She drew him to her, and laid her head upon his shoulder; hiding her face even there.

"My poor, poor boy! my poor, poor darling! Oh! would that I had died—I had died, in my innocent-girlhood!"

"Mother! mother!" sobbed Leonard. "What is the matter? Why do you look so wild and ill? Why do you call me your 'poor boy?' Are we not going to Scaurside-hill? I don't much mind it, mother; only please don't gasp and quiver so. Dearest mother, are you ill? Let me call Aunt Faith!"

Ruth lifted herself up, and put away the hair that had fallen over and was blinding her eyes. She looked at him with intense wistfulness.



"Kiss me, Leonard!" said she—"kiss me, my darling, once more in the old way!" Leonard threw himself into her arms, and hugged her with all his force, and their lips clung together as in the kiss given to the dying.

"Leonard!" said she at length, holding him away from her, and nerving herself up to tell him all by one spasmodic effort—"Listen to me." The boy stood breathless and still, gazing at her. On her impetuous transit from Mr. Bradshaw's to the Chapel-house, her wild desperate thought had been that she would call herself by every violent, coarse name which the world might give her—that Leonard should hear those words applied to his mother first from her own lips; but the influence of his presence—for he was a holy and sacred creature in her eyes, and this point remained steadfast, though all the rest were upheaved—subdued her; and now it seemed as if she could not find words fine enough, and pure enough, to convey the truth that he must learn, and should learn from no tongue but hers.

“Leonard—when I was very young I did very wrong. I think God, who knows all, will judge me more tenderly than men—but I did wrong in a way which you cannot understand yet” (she saw the red flush come into his cheek, and it stung her as the first token of that shame which was to be his portion through life)—“in a way people never forget, never forgive. You will hear me called the hardest names that ever can be thrown at women—I have been, to-day; and, my child, you must bear it patiently, because they will be partly true. Never get confused, by your love for me, into thinking that what I did was right.—Where was I?” said she, suddenly faltering, and forgetting all she had said and all she had got to say; and then, seeing Leonard’s face of wonder, and burning shame and indignation, she went on more rapidly, as fearing lest her strength should fail before she had ended.

“And Leonard,” continued she, in a trembling, sad voice, “this is not all. The punishment of punishments lies awaiting me still. It is to see you

suffer for my wrong-doing. Yes, darling! they will speak shameful things of you, poor innocent child, as well as of me, who am guilty. They will throw it in your teeth through life, that your mother was never married—was not married when you were born——”

“Were not you married? Are not you a widow?” asked he abruptly, for the first time getting anything like a clear idea of the real state of the case.

“No! May God forgive me, and help me!” exclaimed she, as she saw a strange look of repugnance cloud over the boy’s face, and felt a slight motion on his part to extricate himself from her hold. It was as slight, as transient as it could be—over in an instant. But she had taken her hands away, and covered up her face with them as quickly—covered up her face in shame before her child; and in the bitterness of her heart she was wailing out, “Oh, would to God I had died—that I had died as a

baby—that I had died as a little baby hanging at my mother's breast !”

“ Mother,” said Leonard, timidly putting his hand on her arm; but she shrunk from him, and continued her low, passionate wailing. “ Mother,” said he, after a pause, coming nearer, though she saw it not—“ mammy darling,” said he, using the caressing name, which he had been trying to drop as not sufficiently manly, “ mammy, my own, own dear, dear, darling mother, I don't believe them—I don't, I don't, I don't, I don't !” He broke out into a wild burst of crying, as he said this. In a moment her arms were round the poor boy, and she was hushing him up like a baby on her bosom. “ Hush, Leonard ! Leonard, be still, my child ! I have been too sadden with you !—I have done you harm—oh ! I have done you nothing but harm,” cried she, in a tone of bitter self-reproach.

“ No, mother !” said he, stopping his tears, and his eyes blazing out with earnestness, “ there never

was such a mother as you have been to me, and I won't believe any one who says it. I won't ; and I'll knock them down if they say it again, I will !" He clenched his fist, with a fierce defiant look on his face.

" You forget, my child," said Ruth, in the sweetest, saddest tone that ever was heard, " I said it of myself ; I said it because it was true." Leonard threw his arms tight round her, and hid his face against her bosom. She felt him pant there like some hunted creature. She had no soothing comfort to give him. " Oh, that she and he lay dead !"

At last, exhausted, he lay so still and motionless, that she feared to look. She wanted him to speak, yet dreaded his first words. She kissed his hair, his head, his very clothes ; murmuring low inarticulate moaning sounds.

" Leonard," said she, " Leonard, look up at me ! Leonard, look up !" But he only clung the closer, and hid his face the more.

"My boy!" said she, "what can I do or say? If I tell you never to mind it—that it is nothing—I tell you false. It is a bitter shame and a sorrow that I have drawn down upon you. A shame, Leonard, because of me, your mother; but, Leonard, it is no disgrace or lowering of you in the eyes of God." She spoke now as if she had found the clue which might lead him to rest and strength at last. "Remember that, always. Remember that, when the time of trial comes—and it seems a hard and cruel thing that you should be called reproachful names by men, and all for what was no fault of yours—remember God's pity and God's justice; and though my sin shall have made you an outcast in the world—oh, my child, my child!"—(she felt him kiss her, as if mutely trying to comfort her—it gave her strength to go on)—"remember, darling of my heart, it is only your own sin that can make you an outcast from God."

She grew so faint that her hold of him relaxed. He looked up affrighted. He brought her water—

he threw it over her ; in his terror at the notion that she was going to die and leave him, he called her by every fond name, imploring her to open her eyes.

When she partially recovered, he helped her to the bed, on which she lay still, wan and death-like. She almost hoped the swoon that hung around her might be Death, and in that imagination she opened her eyes to take a last look at her boy. She saw him pale and terror-stricken ; and pity for his affright roused her, and made her forget herself in the wish that he should not see her death, if she were indeed dying.

“ Go to Aunt Faith ! ” whispered she ; “ I am weary, and want sleep.”

Leonard arose slowly and reluctantly. She tried to smile upon him, that what she thought would be her last look might dwell in his remembrance as tender and strong ; she watched him to the door, she saw him hesitate, and return to her. He came back to her, and said in a timid, apprehensive tone :

“Mother—will *they* speak to me about——
it?”

Ruth closed her eyes, that they might not express the agony she felt, like a sharp knife, at this question. Leonard had asked it with a child's desire of avoiding painful and mysterious topics,—from no personal sense of shame as she understood it, shame beginning thus early, thus instantaneously.

“No,” she replied. “You may be sure they will not.”

So he went. But now she would have been thankful for the unconsciousness of fainting; that one little speech bore so much meaning to her hot irritable brain. Mr. and Miss Benson, all in their house, would never speak to the boy—but in his home alone would he be safe from what he had already learnt to dread. Every form in which shame and opprobrium could overwhelm her darling, haunted her. She had been exercising strong self-control for his sake ever since she had met him

at the house-door ; there was now a re-action. His presence had kept her mind on its perfect balance. When that was withdrawn, the effect of the strain of power was felt. And athwart the fever-mists that arose to obscure her judgment, all sorts of will-o'-the-wisp plans flittered before her ; tempting her to this and that course of action—to anything rather than patient endurance—to relieve her present state of misery by some sudden spasmodic effort, that took the semblance of being wise and right. Gradually all her desires, all her longing, settled themselves on one point. What had she done—what could she do, to Leonard, but evil ? If she were away, and gone no one knew where—lost in mystery, as if she were dead—perhaps the cruel hearts might reflect, and show pity on Leonard ; while her perpetual presence would but call up the remembrance of his birth. Thus she reasoned in her hot dull brain ; and shaped her plans in accordance.

Leonard stole down-stairs noiselessly. He listened to find some quiet place where he could hide

himself. The house was very still. Miss Benson thought the purposed expedition had taken place, and never dreamed but that Ruth and Leonard were on distant sunny Scaurside-hill ; and after a very early dinner, she had set out to drink tea with a farmer's wife who lived in the country two or three miles off. Mr. Benson meant to have gone with her ; but while they were at dinner, he had received an unusually authoritative note from Mr. Bradshaw desiring to speak with him, so he went to that gentleman's house instead. Sally was busy in her kitchen, making a great noise (not unlike a groom rubbing down a horse) over her cleaning. Leonard stole into the sitting-room, and crouched behind the large old-fashioned sofa to ease his sore, aching heart, by crying with all the prodigal waste and abandonment of childhood.

Mr. Benson was shown into Mr. Bradshaw's own particular room. The latter gentleman was walking up and down, and it was easy to perceive that something had occurred to chafe him to great anger.

"Sit down, sir!" said he to Mr. Benson, nodding to a chair.

Mr. Benson sat down. But Mr. Bradshaw continued his walk for a few minutes longer without speaking. Then he stopped abruptly, right in front of Mr. Benson; and in a voice which he tried to render calm, but which trembled with passion—with a face glowing purple as he thought of his wrongs (and real wrongs they were) he began:

"Mr. Benson, I have sent for you to ask—I am almost too indignant at the bare suspicion to speak as becomes me—but did you—I really shall be obliged to beg your pardon, if you are as much in the dark as I was yesterday, as to the character of that woman who lives under your roof?"

There was no answer from Mr. Benson. Mr. Bradshaw looked at him very earnestly. His eyes were fixed on the ground—he made no inquiry—he uttered no expression of wonder or dismay. Mr. Bradshaw ground his foot on the floor with gathering rage; but, just as he was about to speak, Mr.

Benson rose up—a poor deformed old man—before the stern and portly figure that was swelling and panting with passion.

“Hear me, sir!” (stretching out his hand as if to avert the words which were impending.) “Nothing you can say, can upbraid me like my own conscience; no degradation you can inflict, by word or deed, can come up to the degradation I have suffered for years, at being a party to a deceit, even for a good end——”

“For a good end!—Nay! what next?”

The taunting contempt with which Mr. Bradshaw spoke these words, almost surprised himself by what he imagined must be its successful power of withering; but in spite of it, Mr. Benson lifted his grave eyes to Mr. Bradshaw’s countenance, and repeated:

“For a good end. The end was not, as perhaps you consider it to have been, to obtain her admission into your family—nor yet to put her in the way of getting her livelihood; my sister and I would will-

ingly have shared what we have with her; it was our intention to do so at first, if not for any length of time, at least as long as her health might require it. Why I advised (perhaps I only yielded to advice) a change of name—an assumption of a false state of widowhood—was because I earnestly desired to place her in circumstances in which she might work out her self-redemption; and you, sir, know how terribly the world goes against all such as have sinned as Ruth did. She was so young, too.”

“ You mistake, sir; my acquaintance has not lain so much among that class of sinners as to give me much experience of the way in which they are treated. But, judging from what I have seen, I should say they meet with full as much leniency as they deserve; and supposing they do not—I know there are plenty of sickly sentimentalists just now who reserve all their interest and regard for criminals—why not pick out one of these to help you in your task of washing the blackamoor white? Why choose me to be imposed upon—my household into which

to intrude your *protégée*? Why were my innocent children to be exposed to corruption? I say," said Mr. Bradshaw, stamping his foot, "how dared you come into this house, where you were looked upon as a minister of religion, with a lie in your mouth? How dared you single me out, of all people, to be gulled and deceived, and pointed at through the town as the person who had taken an abandoned woman into his house to teach his daughters?"

"I own my deceit was wrong and faithless."

"Yes! you can own it, now it is found out! There is small merit in that, I think!"

"Sir! I claim no merit. I take shame to myself. I did not single you out. You applied to me with your proposal that Ruth should be your children's governess."

"Pah!"

"And the temptation was too great—No! I will not say that—but the temptation was greater than I could stand—it seemed to open out a path of usefulness."

"Now, don't let me hear you speak so," said Mr. Bradshaw, blazing up. "I can't stand it. It is too much to talk in that way when the usefulness was to consist in contaminating my innocent girls."

"God knows that if I had believed there had been any danger of such contamination—God knows how I would have died sooner than have allowed her to enter your family. Mr. Bradshaw, you believe me, don't you?" asked Mr. Benson, earnestly.

"I really must be allowed the privilege of doubting what you say in future," said Mr. Bradshaw, in a cold, contemptuous manner.

"I have deserved this," Mr. Benson replied. "But," continued he, after a moment's pause, "I will not speak of myself, but of Ruth. Surely, sir, the end I aimed at (the means I took to obtain it were wrong, you cannot feel that more than I do) was a right one; and you will not—you cannot say, that your children have suffered from associating with her. I had her in my family, under the watchful eyes of three anxious persons for a year or more;

we saw faults—no human being is without them—and poor Ruth's were but slight venial errors; but we saw no sign of a corrupt mind—no glimpse of boldness or forwardness—no token of want of conscientiousness; she seemed, and was, a young and gentle girl, who had been led astray before she fairly knew what life was."

"I suppose most depraved women have been innocent in their time," said Mr. Bradshaw, with bitter contempt.

"Oh, Mr. Bradshaw! Ruth was not depraved, and you know it. You cannot have seen her—have known her daily, all these years, without acknowledging that!" Mr. Benson was almost breathless, awaiting Mr. Bradshaw's answer. The quiet self-control which he had maintained so long, was gone now.

"I saw her daily—I did *not* know her. If I had known her, I should have known she was fallen and depraved, and consequently not fit to come into my house, nor to associate with my pure children."

“Now I wish God would give me power to speak out convincingly what I believe to be His truth, that not every woman who has fallen is depraved; that many—how many the Great Judgment Day will reveal to those who have shaken off the poor, sore, penitent hearts on earth—many, many crave and hunger after a chance for virtue—the help which no man gives to them—help—that gentle tender help which Jesus gave once to Mary Magdalen.” Mr. Benson was almost choked by his own feelings.

“Come, come, Mr. Benson, let us have no more of this morbid way of talking. The world has decided how such women are to be treated; and, you may depend upon it, there is so much practical wisdom in the world that its way of acting is right in the long run, and that no one can fly in its face with impunity, unless, indeed, they stoop to deceit and imposition.”

“I take my stand with Christ against the world,” said Mr. Benson, solemnly, disregarding the covert

allusion to himself. "What have the world's ways ended in? Can we be much worse than we are?"

"Speak for yourself, if you please."

"Is it not time to change some of our ways of thinking and acting? I declare before God, that if I believe in any one human truth, it is this—that to every woman, who, like Ruth, has sinned, should be given a chance of self-redemption—and that such a chance should be given in no supercilious or contemptuous manner, but in the spirit of the holy Christ."

"Such as getting her into a friend's house under false colours."

"I do not argue on Ruth's case. In that I have acknowledged my error. I do not argue on any case. I state my firm belief, that it is God's will that we should not dare to trample any of His creatures down to the hopeless dust; that it is God's will that the women who have fallen should be numbered among those who have broken hearts to

be bound up, not cast aside as lost beyond recal. If this be God's will, as a thing of God it will stand; and He will open a way."

"I should have attached much more importance to all your exhortation on this point, if I could have respected your conduct in other matters. As it is, when I see a man who has deluded himself into considering falsehood right, I am disinclined to take his opinion on subjects connected with morality; and I can no longer regard him as a fitting exponent of the will of God. You perhaps understand what I mean, Mr. Benson. I can no longer attend your chapel."

If Mr. Benson had felt any hope of making Mr. Bradshaw's obstinate mind receive the truth, that he acknowledged and repented of his connivance at the falsehood by means of which Ruth had been received into the Bradshaw family, this last sentence prevented his making the attempt. He simply bowed and took his leave—Mr. Bradshaw attending him to the door with formal ceremony.

He felt acutely the severance of the tie which Mr. Bradshaw had just announced to him. He had experienced many mortifications in his intercourse with that gentleman, but they had fallen off from his meek spirit like drops of water from a bird's plumage ; and now he only remembered the acts of substantial kindness rendered (the ostentation all forgotten)—many happy hours and pleasant evenings—the children whom he had loved dearer than he thought till now—the young people about whom he had cared, and whom he had striven to lead aright. He was but a young man when Mr. Bradshaw first came to his chapel ; they had grown old together ; he had never recognised Mr. Bradshaw as an old familiar friend so completely, as now when they were severed.

It was with a heavy heart that he opened his own door. He went to his study immediately ; he sat down to steady himself into his position.

How long he was there—silent and alone—reviewing his life—confessing his sins—he did not

know ; but he heard some unusual sound in the house that disturbed him—roused him to present life. A slow, languid step came along the passage to the front door—the breathing was broken by many sighs.

Ruth's hand was on the latch when Mr. Benson came out. Her face was very white, except two red spots on each cheek—her eyes were deep sunk and hollow, but glittered with feverish lustre. "Ruth!" exclaimed he. She moved her lips, but her throat and mouth were too dry for her to speak.

"Where are you going?" asked he ; for she had all her walking things on, yet trembled so, even as she stood, that it was evident she could not walk far without falling.

She hesitated—she looked up at him, still with the same dry glittering eyes. At last she whispered (for she could only speak in a whisper), "To Helmsby—I am going to Helmsby."

"Helmsby! my poor girl—may God have mercy

upon you!" for he saw she hardly knew what she was saying. "Where is Helmsby?"

"I don't know. In Lincolnshire, I think."

"But why are you going there?"

"Hush! he's asleep," said she, as Mr. Benson had unconsciously raised his voice.

"Who is asleep?" asked Mr. Benson.

"That poor little boy," said she, beginning to quiver and cry.

"Come here!" said he, authoritatively, drawing her into the study.

"Sit down in that chair. I will come back directly."

He went in search of his sister, but she had not returned. Then he had recourse to Sally, who was as busy as ever about her cleaning.

"How long has Ruth been at home?" asked he.

"Ruth! She has never been at home since morning. She and Leonard were to be off for the day somewhere or other with them Bradshaw girls."

"Then she has had no dinner?"

"Not here, any rate. I can't answer for what she may have done at other places."

"And Leonard—where is he?"

"How should I know? With his mother, I suppose. Leastways, that was what was fixed on. I've enough to do of my own, without routing after other folks."

She went on scouring in no very good temper. Mr. Benson stood silent for a moment.

"Sally," he said, "I want a cup of tea. Will you make it as soon as you can; and some dry toast too. I'll come for it in ten minutes."

Struck by something in his voice, she looked up at him for the first time.

"What ha' ye been doing to yourself, to look so grim and grey. Tiring yourself all to tatters, looking after some naught, I'll be bound! Well! well! I mun make ye your tea, I reckon; but I did hope as you grew older you'd ha' grown wiser!"

Mr. Benson made no reply, but went to look for

Leonard, hoping that the child's presence might bring back to his mother the power of self-control. He opened the parlour-door, and looked in, but saw no one. Just as he was shutting it, however, he heard a deep, broken, sobbing sigh; and, guided by the sound, he found the boy lying on the floor, fast asleep, but with his features all swollen and disfigured by passionate crying.

"Poor child! This was what she meant, then," thought Mr. Benson. "He has begun his share of the sorrows too," he continued, pitifully. "No! I will not waken him back to consciousness." So he returned alone into the study. Ruth sat where he had placed her, her head bent back, and her eyes shut. But when he came in she started up.

"I must be going," she said, in a hurried way.

"Nay, Ruth, you must not go. You must not leave us. We cannot do without you. We love you too much."

"Love me!" said she, looking at him wistfully. As she looked, her eyes filled slowly with tears. It

was a good sign, and Mr. Benson took heart to go on.

"Yes! Ruth. You know we do. You may have other things to fill up your mind just now, but you know we love you; and nothing can alter our love for you. You ought not to have thought of leaving us. You would not, if you had been quite well."

"Do you know what has happened?" she asked, in a low, hoarse voice.

"Yes. I know all," he answered. "It makes no difference to us. Why should it?"

"Oh! Mr. Benson, don't you know that my shame is discovered?" she replied, bursting into tears—"and I must leave you, and leave Leonard, that you may not share in my disgrace."

"You must do no such thing. Leave Leonard! You have no right to leave Leonard. Where could you go to?"

"To Helmsby," she said, humbly. "It would break my heart to go, but I think I ought, for

Leonard's sake. I know I ought." She was crying sadly by this time, but Mr. Benson knew the flow of tears would ease her brain. "It will break my heart to go, but I know I must."

"Sit still here at present," said he, in a decided tone of command. He went for the cup of tea. He brought it to her without Sally's being aware for whom it was intended.

"Drink this!" He spoke as you would do to a child, if desiring it to take medicine. "Eat some toast." She took the tea, and drank it feverishly; but when she tried to eat, the food seemed to choke her. Still she was docile, and she tried.

"I cannot," said she at last, putting down the piece of toast. There was a return to something of her usual tone in the words. She spoke gently and softly; no longer in the shrill, hoarse voice she had used at first. Mr. Benson sat down by her.

"Now, Ruth, we must talk a little together. I want to understand what your plan was. Where is Helmsby? Why did you fix to go there?"

"It is where my mother lived," she answered. "Before she was married she lived there; and wherever she lived, the people all loved her dearly; and I thought—I think, that for her sake some one would give me work. I meant to tell them the truth," said she, dropping her eyes; "but still they would, perhaps, give me some employment—I don't care what—for her sake. I could do many things," said she, suddenly looking up. "I am sure I could weed—I could in gardens—if they did not like to have me in their houses. But perhaps some one, for my mother's sake—oh! my dear, dear mother!—do you know where and what I am?" she cried out, sobbing afresh.

Mr. Benson's heart was very sore, though he spoke authoritatively, and almost sternly.

"Ruth! you must be still and quiet. I cannot have this. I want you to listen to me. Your thought of Helmsby would be a good one, if it was right for you to leave Eccleston; but I do not think it is. I am certain of this, that it would be a

great sin in you to separate yourself from Leonard. You have no right to sever the tie by which God has bound you together."

"But if I am here they will all know and remember the shame of his birth; and if I go away they may forget——"

"And they may not. And if you go away, he may be unhappy or ill; and you, who above all others have—and have from God—remember *that*, Ruth!—the power to comfort him, the tender patience to nurse him, have left him to the care of strangers. Yes; I know! But we ourselves are as strangers, dearly as we love him, compared to a mother. He may turn to sin, and want the long forbearance, the serene authority of a parent; and where are you? No dread of shame, either for yourself, or even for him, can ever make it right for you to shake off your responsibility." All this time he was watching her narrowly, and saw her slowly yield herself up to the force of what he was saying.

"Besides, Ruth," he continued, "we have gone

on falsely hitherto. It has been my doing, my mistake, my sin. I ought to have known better. Now, let us stand firm on the truth. You have no new fault to repent of. Be brave and faithful. It is to God you answer, not to men. The shame of having your sin known to the world, should be as nothing to the shame you felt at having sinned. We have dreaded men too much, and God too little, in the course we have taken. But now be of good cheer. Perhaps you will have to find your work in the world very low—not quite working in the fields,” said he, with a gentle smile, to which she, downcast and miserable, could give no response. “Nay, perhaps, Ruth,” he went on, “you may have to stand and wait for some time; no one may be willing to use the services you would gladly render; all may turn aside from you, and may speak very harshly of you. Can you accept all this treatment meekly, as but the reasonable and just penance God has laid upon you—feeling no anger against those who slight you, no impatience for the time to

come (and come it surely will—I speak as having the word of God for what I say) when He, having purified you, even as by fire, will make a straight path for your feet? My child, it is Christ the Lord who has told us of this infinite mercy of God. Have you faith enough in it to be brave, and bear on, and do rightly in patience and in tribulation?"

Ruth had been hushed and very still until now, when the pleading earnestness of his question urged her to answer:

"Yes!" said she. "I hope—I believe I can be faithful for myself, for I have sinned and done wrong. But Leonard——" She looked up at him.

"But Leonard," he echoed. "Ah! there it is hard, Ruth. I own the world is hard and persecuting to such as he." He paused to think of the true comfort for this sting. He went on. "The world is not everything, Ruth; nor is the want of men's good opinion and esteem the highest need which man has. Teach Leonard this. You would not wish his life to be one summer's day. You

dared not make it so, if you had the power. Teach him to bid a noble, Christian welcome, to the trials which God sends—and this is one of them. Teach him not to look on a life of struggle, and perhaps of disappointment and incompleteness, as a sad and mournful end, but as the means permitted to the heroes and warriors in the army of Christ, by which to show their faithful following. Tell him of the hard and thorny path which was trodden once by the bleeding feet of One. Ruth! think of the Saviour's life and cruel death, and of his divine faithfulness. Oh, Ruth!" exclaimed he, "when I look and see what you may be—what you *must* be to that boy, I cannot think how you could be coward enough, for a moment, to shrink from your work! But we have all been cowards hitherto," he added, in bitter self-accusation. "God help us to be so no longer!"

Ruth sat very quiet. Her eyes were fixed on the ground, and she seemed lost in thought. At length she rose up.

"Mr. Benson!" said she, standing before him, and propping herself by the table, as she was trembling sadly from weakness, "I mean to try very, very hard, to do my duty to Leonard—and to God," she added, reverently. "I am only afraid my faith may sometimes fail about Leonard——"

"Ask, and it shall be given unto you. That is no vain or untried promise, Ruth!"

She sat down again, unable longer to stand. There was another long silence.

"I must never go to Mr. Bradshaw's again," she said at last, as if thinking aloud.

"No, Ruth, you shall not," he answered.

"But I shall earn no money!" added she, quickly, for she thought that he did not perceive the difficulty that was troubling her.

"You surely know, Ruth, that while Faith and I have a roof to shelter us, or bread to eat, you and Leonard share it with us."

"I know—I know your most tender goodness," said she, "but it ought not to be."

"It must be at present," he said, in a decided manner. "Perhaps, before long you may have some employment ; perhaps it may be some time before an opportunity occurs."


"Hush," said Ruth; "Leonard is moving about in the parlour. I must go to him."

But when she stood up, she turned so dizzy, and tottered so much, that she was glad to sit down again immediately.

"You must rest here. I will go to him," said Mr. Benson. He left her ; and when he was gone, she leaned her head on the back of the chair, and cried quietly and incessantly ; but there was a more patient, hopeful, resolved feeling in her heart, which all along, through all the tears she shed, bore her onwards to higher thoughts, until at last she rose to prayers.

Mr. Benson caught the new look of shrinking shame in Leonard's eye, as it first sought, then shunned, meeting his. He was pained, too, by the sight of the little sorrowful, anxious face, on which,

until now, hope and joy had been predominant. The constrained voice, the few words the boy spoke, when formerly there would have been a glad and free utterance—all this grieved Mr. Benson inexpressibly, as but the beginning of an unwonted mortification, which must last for years. He himself made no allusion to any unusual occurrence; he spoke of Ruth as sitting, overcome by headache, in the study for quietness: he hurried on the preparations for tea, while Leonard sat by in the great arm-chair, and looked on with sad dreamy eyes. He strove to lessen the shock which he knew Leonard had received, by every mixture of tenderness and cheerfulness that Mr. Benson's gentle heart prompted; and now and then a languid smile stole over the boy's face. When his bedtime came, Mr. Benson told him of the hour, although he feared that Leonard would have but another sorrowful crying of himself to sleep; but he was anxious to accustom the boy to cheerful movement within the limits of domestic law, and by no disobedience to it to weaken the



power of glad submission to the Supreme; to begin the new life that lay before him, where strength to look up to God as the Law-giver and Ruler of events would be pre-eminently required. When Leonard had gone up-stairs, Mr. Benson went immediately to Ruth, and said,

“ Ruth! Leonard is just gone up to bed,” secure in the instinct which made her silently rise, and go up to the boy—certain, too, that they would each be the other’s best comforter, and that God would strengthen each through the other.

Now, for the first time, he had leisure to think of himself; and to go over all the events of the day. The half hour of solitude in his study, that he had before his sister’s return, was of inestimable value; he had leisure to put events in their true places, as to importance and eternal significance.

Miss Faith came in laden with farm produce. Her kind entertainers had brought her in their shandry to the opening of the court in which the Chapel-house stood; but she was so heavily bur-

dened with eggs, mushrooms, and plums, that when her brother opened the door she was almost breathless.

"Oh, Thurstan! take this basket—it is such a weight! Oh, Sally, is that you? Here are some magnum-bonums which we must preserve to-morrow. There are guinea-fowl eggs in that basket."

Mr. Benson let her unburden her body, and her mind too, by giving charges to Sally respecting her housekeeping treasures, before he said a word; but when she returned into the study, to tell him the small pieces of intelligence respecting her day at the farm, she stood aghast.

"Why, Thurstan, dear! What's the matter? Is your back hurting you?"

He smiled to reassure her; but it was a sickly and forced smile.

"No, Faith! I am quite well, only rather out of spirits, and wanting to talk to you to cheer me."

Miss Faith sat down, straight, sitting bolt-upright to listen the better.

"I don't know how, but the real story about Ruth is found out."

"Oh, Thurstan!" exclaimed Miss Benson, turning quite white.

For a moment, neither of them said another word. Then she went on.

"Does Mr. Bradshaw know?"

"Yes! He sent for me, and told me."

"Does Ruth know that it has all come out?"

"Yes. And Leonard knows."

"How? Who told him?"

"I do not know. I have asked no questions. But of course it was his mother."

"She was very foolish and cruel, then," said Miss Benson, her eyes blazing, and her lips trembling, at the thought of the suffering her darling boy must have gone through.

"I think she was wise. I am sure it was not cruel. He must have soon known that there was some mystery, and it was better that it should be

told him openly and quietly by his mother than by a stranger."

"How could she tell him quietly?" asked Miss Benson, still indignant.

"Well! perhaps I used the wrong word—of course no one was by—and I don't suppose even they themselves could now tell how it was told, or in what spirit it was borne."

Miss Benson was silent again.

"Was Mr. Bradshaw very angry?"

"Yes, very; and justly so. I did very wrong in making that false statement at first."

"No! I am sure you did not," said Miss Faith.

"Ruth has had some years of peace, in which to grow stronger and wiser, so that she can bear her shame now in a way she never could have done at first."

"All the same it was wrong in me to do what I did."

"I did it too, as much or more than you. And

I don't think it wrong. I'm certain it was quite right, and I would do just the same again."

"Perhaps it has not done you the harm it has done me."

"Nonsense! Thurstan. Don't be morbid. I'm sure you are as good—and better than ever you were."

"No, I am not. I have got what you call morbid just in consequence of the sophistry by which I persuaded myself that wrong could be right. I torment myself. I have lost my clear instincts of conscience. Formerly, if I believed that such or such an action was according to the will of God, I went and did it, or at least I tried to do it, without thinking of consequences. Now, I reason and weigh what will happen if I do so and so—I grope where formerly I saw. Oh, Faith! it is such a relief to me to have the truth known, that I am afraid I have not been sufficiently sympathising with Ruth."

"Poor Ruth!" said Miss Benson. "But at any rate our telling a lie has been the saving of her. There is no fear of her going wrong now."

"God's omnipotence did not need our sin."

They did not speak for some time.

"You have not told me what Mr. Bradshaw said."

"One can't remember the exact words that are spoken on either side in moments of such strong excitement. He was very angry, and said some things about me that were very just, and some about Ruth that were very hard. His last words were that he should give up coming to chapel."

"Oh, Thurstan! did it come to that?"

"Yes."

"Does Ruth know all he said?"

"No! Why should she? I don't know if she knows he has spoken to me at all. Poor creature! she had enough to craze her almost without that! She was for going away and leaving us that we might not share in her disgrace. I was afraid of her being quite delirious. I did so want you, Faith! However, I did the best I could, I spoke to her very coldly, and almost sternly, all the while

my heart was bleeding for her. I dared not give her sympathy; I tried to give her strength. But I did so want you, Faith."

"And I was so full of enjoyment, I am ashamed to think of it. But the Dawsons are so kind—and the day was so fine——Where is Ruth now?"

"With Leonard. He is her great earthly motive—I thought that being with him would be best. But he must be in bed and asleep now."

"I will go up to her," said Miss Faith.

She found Ruth keeping watch by Leonard's troubled sleep; but when she saw Miss Faith she rose up, and threw herself on her neck and clung to her, without speaking. After a while Miss Benson said:

"You must go to bed, Ruth!" So, after she had kissed the sleeping boy, Miss Benson led her away, and helped to undress her, and brought her up a cup of soothing violet-tea—not so soothing as tender actions, and soft loving tones.

CHAPTER IV.

It was well they had so early and so truly strengthened the spirit to bear, for the events which had to be endured soon came thick and threefold.

Every evening Mr. and Miss Benson thought the worst must be over ; and every day brought some fresh occurrence to touch upon the raw place. They could not be certain, until they had seen all their acquaintances, what difference it would make in the cordiality of their reception : in some cases it made much ; and Miss Benson was proportionably indignant. She felt this change in behaviour more than her brother. His great pain arose from the coolness of the Bradshaws. With all the faults which had at times grated on his sensitive nature (but which he now forgot, and remembered only their kindness), they

were his old familiar friends—his kind, if ostentatious, patrons—his great personal interest, out of his own family; and he could not get over the suffering he experienced from seeing their large square pew empty on Sundays—from perceiving how Mr. Bradshaw, though he bowed in a distant manner when he and Mr. Benson met face to face, shunned him as often as he possibly could. All that happened in the household, which once was as patent to him as his own, was now a sealed book; he heard of its doings by chance, if he heard at all. Just at the time when he was feeling the most depressed from this cause, he met Jemima at a sudden turn of the street. He was uncertain for a moment how to accost her, but she saved him all doubt; in an instant she had his hand in both of hers, her face flushed with honest delight.

“ Oh, Mr. Benson, I am so glad to see you! I have so wanted to know all about you! How is poor Ruth? dear Ruth! I wonder if she has forgiven me my cruelty to her? And I may not go

to her now, when I should be so glad and thankful to make up for it."

"I never heard you had been cruel to her. I am sure she does not think so."

"She ought, she must. What is she doing? Oh! I have so much to ask, I can never hear enough; and papa says"—she hesitated a moment, afraid of giving pain, and then, believing that they would understand the state of affairs, and the reason for her behaviour better if she told the truth, she went on: "Papa says I must not go to your house—I suppose it's right to obey him?"

"Certainly, my dear. It is your clear duty. We know how you feel towards us."

"Oh! but if I could do any good—if I could be of any use or comfort to any of you—especially to Ruth, I should come, duty or not. I believe it would be my duty," said she, hurrying on to try and stop any decided prohibition from Mr. Benson. "No! don't be afraid; I won't come till I know I can do some good. I hear bits about you through

Sally every now and then, or I could not have waited so long. Mr. Benson," continued she, reddening very much, "I think you did quite right about poor Ruth."

"Not in the falsehood, my dear."

"No! not perhaps in that. I was not thinking of that. But I have been thinking a great deal about poor Ruth's—you know I could not help it when everybody was talking about it—and it made me think of myself, and what I am. With a father and mother, and home and careful friends, I am not likely to be tempted like Ruth; but oh! Mr. Benson," said she, lifting her eyes, which were full of tears, to his face, for the first time since she began to speak, "if you knew all I have been thinking and feeling this last year, you would see how I have yielded to every temptation that was able to come to me; and, seeing how I have no goodness or strength in me, and how I might just have been like Ruth, or rather, worse than she ever was, because I am more headstrong and passionate by

nature, I do so thank you and love you for what you did for her ! And will you tell me really and truly now if I can ever do anything for Ruth ? If you'll promise me that, I wont rebel unnecessarily against papa ; but if you don't, I will, and come and see you all this very afternoon. Remember ! I trust you !" said she, breaking away. Then turning back, she came to ask after Leonard.

" He must know something of it," said she. " Does he feel it much ?"

" Very much," said Mr. Benson. Jemima shook her head sadly.

" It is hard upon him," said she.

" It is," Mr. Benson replied.


For in truth, Leonard was their greatest anxiety in-doors. His health seemed shaken, he spoke half sentences in his sleep, which showed that in his dreams he was battling on his mother's behalf against an unkind and angry world. And then he would wail to himself, and utter sad words of shame, which they never thought had reached his ears. By day,

he was in general grave and quiet; but his appetite varied, and he was evidently afraid of going into the streets, dreading to be pointed at as an object of remark. Each separately in their hearts longed to give him change of scene, but they were all silent, for where was the requisite money to come from?

His temper became fitful and variable. At times he would be most sullen against his mother; and then give way to a passionate remorse. When Mr. Benson caught Ruth's look of agony at her child's rebuffs, his patience failed; or rather, I should say, he believed that a stronger, severer hand than hers was required for the management of the lad. But, when she heard Mr. Benson say so, she pleaded with him.

"Have patience with Leonard," she said. "I have deserved the anger that is fretting in his heart. It is only I who can reinstate myself in his love and respect. I have no fear. When he sees me really striving hard and long to do what is right, he must love me. I am not afraid."


Even while she spoke, her lips quivered, and her colour went and came with eager anxiety. So Mr. Benson held his peace, and let her take her course. It was beautiful to see the intuition by which she divined what was passing in every fold of her child's heart, so as to be always ready with the right words to soothe or to strengthen him. Her watchfulness was unwearied, and with no thought of self tainting it, or else she might have often paused to turn aside and weep at the clouds of shame which came over Leonard's love for her, and hid it from all but her faithful heart; she believed and knew that he was yet her own affectionate boy, although he might be gloomily silent, or apparently hard and cold. And in all this, Mr. Benson could not choose but admire the way in which she was insensibly teaching Leonard to conform to the law of right, to recognise Duty in the mode in which every action was performed. When Mr. Benson saw this, he knew that all goodness would follow, and that the claims which his mother's infinite love had on the boy's heart



would be acknowledged at last, and all the more fully because she herself never urged them, but silently admitted the force of the reason that caused them to be for a time forgotten. By-and-by Leonard's remorse at his ungracious and sullen ways to his mother—ways that alternated with passionate, fitful bursts of clinging love—assumed more the character of repentance ; he tried to do so no more. But still his health was delicate; he was averse to going out of doors; he was much graver and sadder than became his age. It was what must be; an inevitable consequence of what had been ; and Ruth had to be patient, and pray in secret, and with many tears, for the strength she needed.

She knew what it was to dread the going out into the streets after her story had become known. For days and days she had silently shrunk from this effort. But one evening towards dusk, Miss Benson was busy, and asked her to go an errand for her; and Ruth got up and silently obeyed her. That silence

as to inward suffering was only one part of her peculiar and exquisite sweetness of nature; part of the patience with which she "accepted her penance." Her true instincts told her that it was not right to disturb others with many expressions of her remorse; that the holiest repentance consisted in a quiet and daily sacrifice. Still there were times when she wearied pitifully of her inaction. She was so willing to serve and work, and every one despised her services. Her mind, as I have said before, had been well cultivated during these last few years; so now she used all the knowledge she had gained in teaching Leonard, which was an employment that Mr. Benson relinquished willingly, because he felt that it would give her some of the occupation that she needed. She endeavoured to make herself useful in the house in every way she could; but the waters of housekeeping had closed over her place during the time of her absence at Mr. Bradshaw's—and, besides, now that they were trying to restrict every



unnecessary expense, it was sometimes difficult to find work for three women. Many and many a time Ruth turned over in her mind every possible chance of obtaining employment for her leisure hours, and nowhere could she find it. Now and then Sally, who was her confidante in this wish, procured her some needlework, but it was of a coarse and common kind, soon done, lightly paid for. But whatever it was, Ruth took it, and was thankful, although it added but a few pence to the household purse. I do not mean that there was any great need of money; but a new adjustment of expenditure was required—a reduction of wants which had never been very extravagant.

Ruth's salary of forty pounds was gone, while more of her "keep," as Sally called it, was thrown upon the Bensons. Mr. Benson received about eighty pounds a year for his salary as minister. Of this, he knew that twenty pounds came from Mr. Bradshaw; and when the old man appointed to collect the pew-rents brought him the quarterly amount,


and he found no diminution in them, he inquired how it was, and learnt that, although Mr. Bradshaw had expressed to the collector his determination never to come to chapel again, he had added, that of course his pew-rent should be paid all the same. But this Mr. Benson could not suffer; and the old man was commissioned to return the money to Mr. Bradshaw, as being what his deserted minister could not receive.

Mr. and Miss Benson had about thirty or forty pounds coming in annually from a sum which, in happier days, Mr. Bradshaw had invested in Canal shares for them. Altogether their income did not fall much short of a hundred a-year, and they lived in the Chapel-house free of rent. So Ruth's small earnings were but very little in actual hard commercial account, though in another sense they were much; and Miss Benson always received them with quiet simplicity. By degrees, Mr. Benson absorbed some of Ruth's time in a gracious and natural way. He employed her mind in all the

kind offices he was accustomed to render to the poor around him. And as much of the peace and ornament of life as they gained now, was gained on a firm basis of truth. If Ruth began low down to find her place in the world, at any rate there was no flaw in the foundation.

Leonard was still their great anxiety. At times the question seemed to be, could he live through all this trial of the elasticity of childhood? And then they knew how precious a blessing—how true a pillar of fire, he was to his mother: and how black the night, and how dreary the wilderness would be, when he was not. The child and the mother were each messengers of God—angels to each other.

They had long gaps between the pieces of intelligence respecting the Bradshaws. Mr. Bradshaw had at length purchased the house at Abermouth, and they were much there. The way in which the Bensons heard most frequently of the family of their former friends, was through Mr. Farquhar.



He called on Mr. Benson about a month after the latter had met Jemima in the street. Mr. Farquhar was not in the habit of paying calls on any one; and though he had always entertained and evinced the most kind and friendly feeling towards Mr. Benson, he had rarely been in the Chapel-house. Mr. Benson received him courteously, but he rather expected that there would be some especial reason alleged, before the conclusion of the visit, for its occurrence; more particularly as Mr. Farquhar sat talking on the topics of the day in a somewhat absent manner, as if they were not the subjects most present to his mind. The truth was, he could not help recurring to the last time when he was in that room, waiting to take Leonard a ride, and his heart beating rather more quickly than usual at the idea that Ruth might bring the boy in when he was equipped. He was very full now of the remembrance of Ruth; and yet he was also most thankful, most self-gratulatory, that he had gone no further in his admiration of her—that he had

never expressed his regard in words—that no one, as he believed, was cognisant of the incipient love which had grown partly out of his admiration, and partly out of his reason. He was thankful to be spared any implication in the nine-days' wonder which her story had made in Eccleston. And yet his feeling for her had been of so strong a character, that he winced, as with extreme pain, at every application of censure to her name. These censures were often exaggerated, it is true; but when they were just in their judgment of the outward circumstances of the case, they were not the less painful and distressing to him. His first rebound to Jemima was occasioned by Mrs. Bradshaw's account of how severely her husband was displeased at her daughter's having taken part with Ruth; and he could have thanked and almost blessed Jemima when she dropped in (she dared do no more) her pleading excuses and charitable explanations on Ruth's behalf. Jemima had learnt some humility from the discovery which had been to her so great a shock;

standing, she had learnt to take heed lest she fell; and when she had once been aroused to a perception of the violence of the hatred which she had indulged against Ruth, she was more reticent and measured in the expression of all her opinions. It showed how much her character had been purified from pride, that now she felt aware that what in her was again attracting Mr. Farquhar was her faithful advocacy of her rival, wherever such advocacy was wise or practicable. He was quite unaware that Jemima had been conscious of his great admiration for Ruth; he did not know that she had ever cared enough for him to be jealous. But the unacknowledged bond between them now was their grief, and sympathy, and pity for Ruth; only in Jemima these feelings were ardent, and would fain have become active; while in Mr. Farquhar they were strongly mingled with thankfulness that he had escaped a disagreeable position, and a painful notoriety. His natural caution induced him to make a resolution never to think of any woman as

a wife until he had ascertained all her antecedents, from her birth upwards; and the same spirit of caution, directed inwardly, made him afraid of giving too much pity to Ruth, for fear of the conclusions to which such a feeling might lead him. But still his old regard for her, for Leonard, and his esteem and respect for the Bensons, induced him to lend a willing ear to Jemima's earnest entreaty that he would go and call on Mr. Benson, in order that she might learn something about the family in general, and Ruth in particular. It was thus that he came to sit by Mr. Benson's study fire, and to talk, in an absent way, to that gentleman. How they got on the subject he did not know, more than one-half of his attention being distracted, but they were speaking about politics, when Mr. Farquhar learned that Mr. Benson took in no newspaper.

"Will you allow me to send you over my *Times*? I have generally done with it before twelve o'clock, and after that it is really waste-paper in my house. You will oblige me by making use of it."

"I am sure I am very much obliged to you for thinking of it. But do not trouble yourself to send it; Leonard can fetch it."

"How is Leonard now?" asked Mr. Farquhar, and he tried to speak indifferently; but a grave look of intelligence clouded his eyes as he looked for Mr. Benson's answer. "I have not met him lately."

"No!" said Mr. Benson, with an expression of pain in his countenance, though he, too, strove to speak in his usual tone.

"Leonard is not strong, and we find it difficult to induce him to go much out of doors."

There was a little silence for a minute or two, during which Mr. Farquhar had to check an unbidden sigh. But, suddenly rousing himself into a determination to change the subject, he said:

"You will find rather a lengthened account of the exposure of Sir Thomas Campbell's conduct at Baden. He seems to be a complete blackleg, in spite of his baronetcy. I fancy the papers are glad to get hold of anything just now."

"Who is Sir Thomas Campbell?" asked Mr. Benson.

"Oh, I thought you might have heard the report—a true one, I believe—of Mr. Donne's engagement to his daughter. He must be glad she jilted him now, I fancy, after this public exposure of her father's conduct." (That was an awkward speech, as Mr. Farquhar felt; and he hastened to cover it, by going on without much connexion:)

"Dick Bradshaw is my informant about all these projected marriages in high life—they are not much in my way; but since he has come down from London to take his share in the business, I think I have heard more of the news and the scandal of what, I suppose, would be considered high life, than ever I did before; and Mr. Donne's proceedings seem to be an especial object of interest to him."

"And Mr. Donne is engaged to a Miss Campbell, is he?"

"Was engaged; if I understood right, she broke off the engagement to marry some Russian prince or

other—a better match, Dick Bradshaw told me. I assure you,” continued Mr. Farquhar, smiling, “I am a very passive recipient of all such intelligence, and might very probably have forgotten all about it, if the *Times*, of this morning had not been so full of the disgrace of the young lady’s father.”

“Richard Bradshaw has quite left London, has he?” asked Mr. Benson, who felt far more interest in his old patron’s family than in all the Campbells that ever were or ever would be.

“Yes. He has come to settle down here. I hope he may do well, and not disappoint his father, who has formed very high expectations from him; I am not sure if they are not too high for any young man to realise.” Mr. Farquhar could have said more, but Dick Bradshaw was Jemima’s brother, and an object of anxiety to her.

“I am sure, I trust such a mortification—such a grief as any disappointment in Richard, may not befall his father,” replied Mr. Benson.

“Jemima—Miss Bradshaw,” said Mr. Farquhar,

hesitating, "was most anxious to hear of you all. I hope I may tell her you are all well" (with an emphasis on *all*); "that——"

"Thank you. Thank her for us. We are all well; all except Leonard, who is not strong, as I said before. But we must be patient. Time, and such devoted, tender love as he has from his mother, must do much."

Mr. Farquhar was silent.

"Send him to my house for the papers. It will be a little necessity for him to have some regular exercise, and to face the world. He must do it, sooner or later."

The two gentlemen shook hands with each other warmly on parting; but no further allusion was made to either Ruth or Leonard.

So Leonard went for the papers. Stealing along by back streets—running with his head bent down—his little heart panting with dread of being pointed out as his mother's child—so he used to come back, and run trembling to Sally, who would hush

him up to her breast with many a rough-spoken word of pity and sympathy.

Mr. Farquhar tried to catch him to speak to him, and tame him as it were; and, by-and-by, he contrived to interest him sufficiently to induce the boy to stay a little while in the house, or stables, or garden. But the race through the streets was always to be dreaded as the end of ever so pleasant a visit.

Mr. Farquhar kept up the intercourse with the Bensons which he had thus begun. He persevered in paying calls—quiet visits, where not much was said, political or local news talked about, and the same inquiries always made and answered as to the welfare of the two families, who were estranged from each other. Mr. Farquhar's reports were so little varied that Jemima grew anxious to know more particulars.

"Oh, Mr. Farquhar!" said she; "do you think they tell you the truth? I wonder what Ruth can be doing to support herself and Leonard? Nothing

that you can hear of, you say; and, of course, one must not ask the downright question. And yet I am sure they must be pinched in some way. Do you think Leonard is stronger?"

"I am not sure. He is growing fast; and such a blow as he has had will be certain to make him more thoughtful and full of care than most boys of his age; both these circumstances may make him thin and pale, which he certainly is."

"Oh! how I wish I might go and see them all! I could tell in a twinkling the real state of things." She spoke with a tinge of her old impatience.

"I will go again, and pay particular attention to anything you wish me to observe. You see, of course, I feel a delicacy about asking any direct questions, or even alluding in any way to these late occurrences."

"And you never see Ruth by any chance?"

"Never!"

They did not look at each other while this last question was asked and answered.

"I will take the paper to-morrow myself; it will be an excuse for calling again, and I will try to be very penetrating; but I have not much hope of success."

"Oh, thank you. It is giving you a great deal of trouble; but you are very kind."

"Kind, Jemima!" he repeated, in a tone which made her go very red and hot; "must I tell you how you can reward me?—Will you call me Walter?—say, thank you, Walter—just for once."

Jemima felt herself yielding to the voice and tone in which this was spoken; but her very consciousness of the depth of her love made her afraid of giving way, and anxious to be wooed, that she might be reinstated in her self-esteem.

"No!" said she, "I don't think I can call you so. You are too old. It would not be respectful."

She meant it half in joke, and had no idea he would take the allusion to his age so seriously as he did. He rose up, and coldly, as a matter of form, in a changed voice, wished her "Good-by." Her heart

sank ; yet the old pride was there. But, as he was at the very door, some sudden impulse made her speak :

“ I have not vexed you, have I, Walter ? ”

He turned round, glowing with a thrill of delight. She was as red as any rose ; her looks dropped down to the ground.

They were not raised when, half an hour afterwards, she said, “ You won’t forbid my going to see Ruth, will you ? because if you do, I give you notice I shall disobey you.” The arm around her waist clasped her yet more fondly at the idea suggested by this speech, of the control which he should have a right to exercise over her actions at some future day.

“ Tell me,” said he, “ how much of your goodness to me, this last happy hour, has been owing to the desire of having more freedom as a wife than as a daughter ? ”

She was almost glad that he should think she needed any additional motive to her love for him

before she could have accepted him. She was afraid that she had betrayed the deep, passionate regard with which she had long looked upon him. She was lost in delight at her own happiness. She was silent for a time. At length she said:

"I don't think you know how faithful I have been to you ever since the days when you first brought me pistachio-candy from London—when I was quite a little girl."

"Not more faithful than I have been to you," for in truth, the recollection of his love for Ruth had utterly faded away, and he thought himself a model of constancy; "and you have tried me pretty well. What a vixen you have been!"

Jemima sighed; smitten with the consciousness of how little she had deserved her present happiness; humble with the recollection of the evil thoughts that had raged in her heart during the time (which she remembered well, though he might have forgotten it) when Ruth had had the affection which her jealous rival coveted.

"I may speak to your father, may not I, Jemima?"

No! for some reason or fancy which she could not define, and could not be persuaded out of, she wished to keep their mutual understanding a secret. She had a natural desire to avoid the congratulations she expected from her family. She dreaded her father's consideration of the whole affair as a satisfactory disposal of his daughter to a worthy man, who, being his partner, would not require any abstraction of capital from the concern; and Richard's more noisy delight at his sister's having "hooked" so good a match. It was only her simple-hearted mother that she longed to tell. She knew that her mother's congratulations would not jar upon her, though they might not sound the full organ-peal of her love. But all that her mother knew passed onwards to her father; so for the present, at any rate, she determined to realise her secret position alone. Somehow, the sympathy of all others that she most longed for was Ruth's; but

the first communication of such an event was due to her parents. She imposed very strict regulations on Mr. Farquhar's behaviour; and quarrelled and differed from him more than ever, but with a secret joyful understanding with him in her heart, even while they disagreed with each other—for similarity of opinion is not always—I think not often—needed for fulness and perfection of love.

After Ruth's "detection," as Mr. Bradshaw used to call it, he said he could never trust another governess again; so Mary and Elizabeth had been sent to school the following Christmas, and their place in the family was but poorly supplied by the return of Mr. Richard Bradshaw, who had left London, and been received as a partner.

CHAPTER V.

THE conversation narrated in the last chapter as taking place between Mr. Farquhar and Jemima, occurred about a year after Ruth's dismissal from her situation. That year, full of small events, and change of place to the Bradshaws, had been monotonous and long in its course to the other household. There had been no want of peace and tranquillity; there had, perhaps, been more of them than in the preceding years, when, though unacknowledged by any, all must have occasionally felt the oppression of the falsehood—and a slight glancing dread must have flashed across their most prosperous state, lest, somehow or another, the mystery should be disclosed. But now, as the shepherd-boy in John

Bunyan sweetly sang, "He that is low need fear no fall."

Still their peace was as the stillness of a grey autumnal day, when no sun is to be seen above, and when a quiet film seems drawn before both sky and earth, as if to rest the wearied eyes after the summer's glare. Few events broke the monotony of their lives, and those events were of a depressing kind. They consisted in Ruth's futile endeavours to obtain some employment, however humble; in Leonard's fluctuations of spirits and health; in Sally's increasing deafness; in the final and unmendable wearing-out of the parlour carpet, which there was no spare money to replace, and so they cheerfully supplied its want by a large hearth-rug that Ruth made out of ends of list; and, what was more a subject of unceasing regret to Mr. Benson than all, the defection of some of the members of his congregation, who followed Mr. Bradshaw's lead. Their places, to be sure, were more than filled up by the poor, who thronged to his chapel;

but still it was a disappointment to find that people about whom he had been earnestly thinking—to whom he had laboured to do good—should dissolve the connexion without a word of farewell or explanation. Mr. Benson did not wonder that they should go; nay, he even felt it right that they should seek that spiritual help from another, which he, by his error, had forfeited his power to offer; he only wished they had spoken of their intention to him in an open and manly way. But not the less did he labour on among those to whom God permitted him to be of use. He felt age stealing upon him apace, although he said nothing about it, and no one seemed to be aware of it; and he worked the more diligently while “it was yet day.” It was not the number of his years that made him feel old, for he was only sixty, and many men are hale and strong at that time of life; in all probability, it was that early injury to his spine which affected the constitution of his mind as well as his body, and predisposed him, in the opinion of some at

least, to a feminine morbidness of conscience. He had shaken off somewhat of this since the affair with Mr. Bradshaw; he was simpler and more dignified than he had been for several years before, during which time he had been anxious and uncertain in his manner, and more given to thought than to action.

The one happy bright spot in this grey year, was owing to Sally. As she said of herself, she believed she grew more "nattered" as she grew older; but that she was conscious of her "natteredness" was a new thing, and a great gain to the comfort of the house, for it made her very grateful for forbearance, and more aware of kindness than she had ever been before. She had become very deaf; yet she was uneasy and jealous if she were not informed of all the family thoughts, plans, and proceedings, which often had (however private in their details) to be shouted to her at the full pitch of the voice. But she always heard Leonard perfectly. His clear and bell-like voice, which was similar to his mother's,

till sorrow had taken the ring out of it, was sure to be heard by the old servant, though every one else had failed. Sometimes, however, she "got her hearing sudden," as she phrased it, and was alive to every word and noise, more particularly when they did not want her to hear, and at such times she resented their continuance of the habit of speaking loud as a mortal offence. One day, her indignation at being thought deaf called out one of the rare smiles on Leonard's face; she saw it, and said, "Bless thee, lad! if it but amuses thee, they may shout through a ram's horn to me, and I'll never let on I'm not deaf. It's as good a use as I can be of," she continued to herself, "if I can make that poor lad smile a bit."

If she expected to be everybody's confidante, she made Leonard hers. "There!" said she, when she came home from her marketing one Saturday night, "look here, lad! Here's forty-two pound, seven shillings, and twopence! It's a mint of money, isn't it? I took it all in sovereigns for fear of fire."

"What is it all for, Sally?" said he.

"Ay, lad! that's asking. It's Mr. Benson's money," said she, mysteriously, "that I've been keeping for him. Is he in the study, think ye?"

"Yes! I think so. Where have you been keeping it?"

"Never you mind!" She went towards the study, but thinking she might have been hard on her darling in refusing to gratify his curiosity, she turned back, and said:

"I say—if thou wilt, thou mayst do me a job of work some day. I'm wanting a frame made for a piece of writing."

And then she returned to go into the study, carrying her sovereigns in her apron.

"Here, Master Thurstan," said she, pouring them out on the table before her astonished master.

"Take it, it's all yours."

"All mine! What can you mean?" asked he, bewildered.

She did not hear him, and went on:

"Lock it up safe, out o' the way. Dunnot go and leave it about to tempt folks. I'll not answer for myself if money's left about. I may be cribbing a sovereign."

"But where does it come from?" said he.

"Come from!" she replied. "Where does all money come from, but the Bank, to be sure? I thought any one could tell that."

"I have no money in the Bank!" said he, more and more perplexed.

"No! I knowed that; but I had. Dunnot ye remember how you would raise my wage, last Martinmas eighteen year? You and Faith were very headstrong, but I was too deep for you. See thee! I went and put it i' th' Bank. I was never going to touch it; and if I had died it would have been all right, for I'd a will made, all regular and tight—made by a lawyer (leastways he would have been a lawyer, if he hadn't got transported first). And now, thinks I, I think I'll just go and get it out and give it 'em. Banks is not always safe."

"I'll take care of it for you with the greatest pleasure. Still, you know, banks allow interest."

"D'ye suppose I don't know all about interest, and compound interest too, by this time? I tell ye I want ye to spend it. It's your own. It's not mine. It always was yours. Now you're not going to fret me by saying you think it mine."

Mr. Benson held out his hand to her, for he could not speak. She bent forward to him as he sat there, and kissed him.

"Eh, bless ye, lad! It's the first kiss I've had of ye sin' ye were a little lad, and it's a great refreshment. Now don't you and Faith go and bother me with talking about it. It's just yours, and make no more ado."


She went back into the kitchen, and brought out her will, and gave Leonard directions how to make a frame for it; for the boy was a very tolerable joiner, and had a box of tools which Mr. Bradshaw had given him some years ago.

"It's a pity to lose such fine writing," said she;

“ though I can’t say as I can read it. Perhaps you’d just read it for me, Leonard.” She sat open-mouthed with admiration at all the long words.

The frame was made, and the will hung up opposite to her bed, unknown to any one but Leonard; and, by dint of his repeated reading it over to her, she learnt all the words, except “testatrix,” which she would always call “testy tricks.” Mr. Benson had been too much gratified and touched, by her unconditional gift of all she had in the world, to reject it; but he only held it in his hands as a deposit until he could find a safe investment befitting so small a sum. The little re-arrangements of the household expenditure had not touched him as they had done the women. He was aware that meat dinners were not now every-day occurrences; but he preferred puddings and vegetables, and was glad of the exchange. He observed, too, that they all sat together in the kitchen in the evenings; but the kitchen, with the well-scoured dresser, the shining saucepans,

the well-blackened grate and whitened hearth, and the warmth which seemed to rise up from the very flags, and ruddily cheer the most distant corners, appeared a very cozy and charming sitting-room; and, besides, it appeared but right that Sally, in her old age, should have the companionship of those with whom she had lived in love and faithfulness so many years. He only wished he could more frequently leave the solitary comfort of his study, and join the kitchen party; where Sally sat as mistress in the chimney-corner, knitting by fire-light, and Miss Benson and Ruth, with the candle between them, stitched away at their work; while Leonard strewed the ample dresser with his slate and books. He did not mope and pine over his lessons; they were the one thing that took him out of himself. As yet his mother could teach him, though in some respects it was becoming a strain upon her acquirements and powers. Mr. Benson saw this, but reserved his offers of help as long as he could, hoping that before his assistance became



absolutely necessary, some mode of employment beyond that of occasional plain-work might be laid open to Ruth.

In spite of the communication they occasionally had with Mr. Farquhar, when he gave them the intelligence of his engagement to Jemima, it seemed like a glimpse into a world from which they were shut out. They wondered—Miss Benson and Ruth did at least—much about the details. Ruth sat over her sewing, fancying how all had taken place; and as soon as she had arranged the events which were going on among people and places once so familiar to her, she found some discrepancy, and set-to afresh to picture the declaration of love, and the yielding, blushing acceptance; for Mr. Farquhar had told little beyond the mere fact that there was an engagement between himself and Jemima which had existed for some time, but which had been kept secret until now, when it was acknowledged, sanctioned, and to be fulfilled as soon as he returned from an arrangement of family affairs in Scotland.


This intelligence had been enough for Mr. Benson, who was the only person Mr. Farquhar saw; as Ruth always shrank from the post of opening the door, and Mr. Benson was apt at recognising individual knocks, and always prompt to welcome Mr. Farquhar.

Miss Benson occasionally thought—and what she thought she was in the habit of saying—that Jemima might have come herself to announce such an event to old friends; but Mr. Benson decidedly vindicated her from any charge of neglect, by expressing his strong conviction that to her they owed Mr. Farquhar's calls—his all but out-spoken offers of service—his quiet, steady interest in Leonard; and, moreover (repeating the conversation he had had with her in the street, the first time they met after the disclosure), Mr. Benson told his sister how glad he was to find that, with all the warmth of her impetuous disposition hurrying her on to rebellion against her father, she was now attaining to that just self-control which can distinguish between mere

wishes and true reasons—that she could abstain from coming to see Ruth while she could do but little good, reserving herself for some great occasion or strong emergency.

Ruth said nothing, but she yearned all the more in silence to see Jemima. In her recollection of that fearful interview with Mr. Bradshaw, which haunted her yet, sleeping or waking, she was painfully conscious that she had not thanked Jemima for her generous, loving advocacy; it had passed unregarded at the time in intensity of agony—but now she recollected that by no word, or tone, or touch, had she given any sign of gratitude. Mr. Benson had never told her of his meeting with Jemima; so it seemed as if there were no hope of any future opportunity: for it is strange how two households, rent apart by some dissension, can go through life, their parallel existences running side by side, yet never touching each other, near neighbours as they are, habitual and familiar guests as they may have been.

Ruth's only point of hope was Leonard. She was weary of looking for work and employment, which everywhere seemed held above her reach. She was not impatient of this, but she was very, very sorry. She felt within her such capability, and all ignored her, and passed her by on the other side. But she saw some progress in Leonard. Not that he could continue to have the happy development, and genial ripening, which other boys have; leaping from childhood to boyhood, and thence to youth, with glad bounds, and unconsciously enjoying every age. At present there was no harmony in Leonard's character; he was as full of thought and self-consciousness as many men, planning his actions long beforehand, so as to avoid what he dreaded, and what she could not yet give him strength to face, coward as she was herself, and shrinking from hard remarks. Yet Leonard was regaining some of his lost tenderness towards his mother; when they were alone he would throw himself on her neck and smother her with kisses,



without any apparent cause for such a passionate impulse. If any one was by, his manner was cold and reserved. The hopeful parts of his character were the determination evident in him to be a "law unto himself," and the serious thought which he gave to the formation of this law. There was an inclination in him to reason, especially and principally with Mr. Benson, on the great questions of ethics which the majority of the world have settled long ago. But I do not think he ever so argued with his mother. Her lovely patience, and her humility, was earning its reward; and from her quiet piety, bearing sweetly the denial of her wishes—the refusal of her begging—the disgrace in which she lay, while others, less worthy, were employed—this, which perplexed him, and almost angered him at first, called out his reverence at last, and what she said he took for his law with proud humility; and thus, softly, she was leading him up to God. His health was not strong; it was not likely to be. He moaned and talked in his

sleep, and his appetite was still variable, part of which might be owing to his preference of the hardest lessons to any out-door exercise. But this last unnatural symptom was vanishing before the assiduous kindness of Mr. Farquhar, and the quiet but firm desire of his mother. Next to Ruth, Sally had perhaps the most influence over him; but he dearly loved both Mr. and Miss Benson; although he was reserved on this, as on every point not purely intellectual. His was a hard childhood, and his mother felt that it was so. Children bear any moderate degree of poverty and privation cheerfully; but, in addition to a good deal of this, Leonard had to bear a sense of disgrace attaching to him and to the creature he loved best; this it was that took out of him the buoyancy and natural gladness of youth, in a way which no scantiness of food or clothing, or want of any outward comfort, could ever have done.

Two years had past away—two long, eventless years. Something was now going to happen, which

touched their hearts very nearly, though out of their sight and hearing. Jemima was going to be married this August, and by-and-by the very day was fixed. It was to be on the 14th. On the evening of the 13th, Ruth was sitting alone in the parlour, idly gazing out on the darkening shadows in the little garden; her eyes kept filling with quiet tears, that rose, not for her own isolation from all that was going on of bustle and preparation for the morrow's event, but because she had seen how Miss Benson had felt that she and her brother were left out from the gathering of old friends in the Bradshaw family. As Ruth sat, suddenly she was aware of a figure by her; she started up, and in the gloom of the apartment she recognised Jemima. In an instant they were in each other's arms—a long, fast embrace.

“Can you forgive me?” whispered Jemima in Ruth's ear.

“Forgive you! What do you mean? What

have I to forgive? The question is, can I ever thank you as I long to do, if I could find words?"

"Oh, Ruth, how I hated you once!"

"It was all the more noble in you to stand by me as you did. You must have hated me when you knew how I was deceiving you all!"

"No, that was not it that made me hate you. It was before that. Oh, Ruth, I did hate you!"

They were silent for some time, still holding each other's hands. Ruth spoke first.

"And you are going to be married to-morrow!"

"Yes," said Jemima. "To-morrow, at nine o'clock. But I don't think I could have been married without coming to wish Mr. Benson and Miss Faith good-by."

"I will go for them," said Ruth.

"No, not just yet. I want to ask you one or two questions first. Nothing very particular; only it seems as if there had been such a strange, long separation between us. Ruth," said she, dropping

her voice, "is Leonard stronger than he was? I was so sorry to hear about him from Walter. But he is better?" asked she anxiously.

"Yes, he is better. Not what a boy of his age should be," replied his mother, in a tone of quiet but deep mournfulness. "Oh, Jemima!" continued she, "my sharpest punishment comes through him. To think what he might have been, and what he is!"

"But Walter says he is both stronger in health, and not so—nervous and shy." Jemima added the last words in a hesitating and doubtful manner, as if she did not know how to express her full meaning without hurting Ruth.

"He does not show that he feels his disgrace so much. I cannot talk about it, Jemima, my heart aches so about him. But he is better," she continued, feeling that Jemima's kind anxiety required an answer at any cost of pain to herself. "He is only studying too closely now; he takes to his lessons evidently as a relief from thought. He is

very clever, and I hope and trust, yet I tremble to say it, I believe he is very good."

"You must let him come and see us very often when we come back. We shall be two months away. We are going to Germany, partly on Walter's business. Ruth, I have been talking to papa to-night, very seriously and quietly, and it has made me love him so much more, and understand him so much better."

"Does he know of your coming here? I hope he does," said Ruth.

"Yes. Not that he liked my doing it at all. But, somehow, I can always do things against a person's wishes more easily when I am on good terms with them—that's not exactly what I meant; but now to-night, after papa had been showing me that he really loved me more than I ever thought he had done (for I always fancied he was so absorbed in Dick, he did not care much for us girls), I felt brave enough to say that I intended to come here and bid you all good-by. He was silent for a

minute, and then said I might do it, but I must remember he did not approve of it, and was not to be compromised by my coming; still I can tell that, at the bottom of his heart, there is some of the old kindly feeling to Mr. and Miss Benson, and I don't despair of its all being made up, though, perhaps, I ought to say that mamma does."

"Mr. and Miss Benson won't hear of my going away," said Ruth, sadly.

"They are quite right."

"But I am earning nothing. I cannot get any employment. I am only a burden and an expense."

"Are you not also a pleasure? And Leonard, is he not a dear object of love? It is easy for me to talk, I know, who am so impatient. Oh, I never deserved to be so happy as I am! You don't know how good Walter is. I used to think him so cold and cautious. But now, Ruth, will you tell Mr. and Miss Benson that I am here? There is signing of papers, and I don't know what

to be done at home. And when I come back, I hope to see you often, if you'll let me."

Mr. and Miss Benson gave her a warm greeting. Sally was called in, and would bring a candle with her, to have a close inspection of her, in order to see if she was changed—she had not seen her for so long a time, she said; and Jemima stood laughing and blushing in the middle of the room, while Sally studied her all over, and would not be convinced that the old gown which she was wearing for the last time was not one of the new wedding ones. The consequence of which misunderstanding was, that Sally, in her short petticoats and bedgown, turned up her nose at the old-fashioned way in which Miss Bradshaw's gown was made. But Jemima knew the old woman, and rather enjoyed the contempt for her dress. At last she kissed them all, and ran away to her impatient Mr. Farquhar, who was awaiting her.

Not many weeks after this, the poor old woman whom I have named as having become a friend of

Ruth's, during Leonard's illness three years ago, fell down and broke her hip-bone. It was a serious—probably a fatal injury, for one so old ; and as soon as Ruth heard of it she devoted all her leisure time to old Ann Fleming. Leonard had now outstript his mother's powers of teaching, and Mr. Benson gave him his lessons ; so Ruth was a great deal at the cottage both night and day.

There Jemima found her one November evening, the second after their return from their prolonged stay on the Continent. She and Mr. Farquhar had been to the Bensons, and had sat there some time ; and now Jemima had come on just to see Ruth for five minutes, before the evening was too dark for her to return alone. She found Ruth sitting on a stool before the fire, which was composed of a few sticks on the hearth. The blaze they gave was, however, enough to enable her to read ; and she was deep in study of the Bible, in which she had read aloud to the poor old woman, until the latter had fallen asleep. Jemima beckoned her out, and they stood

on the green just before the open door, so that Ruth could see if Ann awoke.

"I have not many minutes to stay, only I felt as if I must see you. And we want Leonard to come to us to see all our German purchases, and hear all our German adventures. May he come to-morrow?"

"Yes; thank you. Oh! Jemima, I have heard something—I have got a plan that makes me so happy! I have not told any one yet. But Mr. Wynne (the parish doctor, you know) has asked me if I would go out as a sick nurse—he thinks he could find me employment."

"You, a sick nurse!" said Jemima, involuntarily glancing over the beautiful lithe figure, and the lovely refinement of Ruth's face, as the light of the rising moon fell upon it. "My dear Ruth, I don't think you are fitted for it!"

"Don't you?" said Ruth, a little disappointed. "I think I am; at least, that I should be very soon. I like being about sick and helpless people; I always feel so sorry for them; and then I think I

have the gift of a very delicate touch, which is such a comfort in many cases. And I should try to be very watchful and patient. Mr. Wynne proposed it himself."

"It was not in that way I meant you were not fitted for it. I meant that you were fitted for something better. Why, Ruth, you are better educated than I am!"

"But if nobody will allow me to teach?—for that is what I suppose you mean. Besides, I feel as if all my education would be needed to make me a good sick nurse."

"Your knowledge of Latin, for instance," said Jemima, hitting, in her vexation at the plan, on the first acquirement of Ruth she could think of.

"Well!" said Ruth, "that won't come amiss; I can read the prescriptions."

"Which the doctors would rather you did not do."

"Still, you can't say that any knowledge of any

kind will be in my way, or will unfit me for my work."

"Perhaps not. But all your taste and refinement will be in your way, and will unfit you."

"You have not thought about this so much as I have, or you would not say so. Any fastidiousness I shall have to get rid of, and I shall be better without; but any true refinement I am sure I shall find of use; for don't you think that every power we have may be made to help us in any right work, whatever that is? Would you not rather be nursed by a person who spoke gently and moved quietly about than by a loud bustling woman?"

"Yes! to be sure; but a person unfit for anything else may move quietly, and speak gently, and give medicine when the doctor orders it, and keep awake at night; and those are the best qualities I ever heard of in a sick nurse."

Ruth was quite silent for some time. At last she said: "At any rate it is work, and as such I

am thankful for it. You cannot discourage me—and perhaps you know too little of what my life has been—how set apart in idleness I have been—to sympathise with me fully.”

“And I wanted you to come to see us—me in my new home. Walter and I had planned that we would persuade you to come to us very often” (she had planned, and Mr. Farquhar had consented); “and now you will have to be fastened up in a sick room.”

“I could not have come,” said Ruth quickly. “Dear Jemima! it is like you to have thought of it—but I could not come to your house. It is not a thing to reason about. It is just feeling. But I do feel as if I could not go. Dear Jemima! if you are ill or sorrowful, and want me, I will come——”

“So you would and must to any one, if you take up that calling.”

“But I should come to you, love, in quite a different way; I should go to you with my heart full

of love—so full that I am afraid I should be too anxious.”

“I almost wish I were ill, that I might make you come at once.”

“And I am almost ashamed to think how I should like you to be in some position in which I could show you how well I remember that day—that terrible day in the school-room. God bless you for it, Jemima!”

CHAPTER VI.

MR. WYNNE, the parish surgeon, was right. He could and did obtain employment for Ruth as a sick nurse. Her home was with the Bensons; every spare moment was given to Leonard and to them; but she was at the call of all the invalids in the town. At first her work lay exclusively among the paupers. At first, too, there was a recoil from many circumstances, which impressed upon her the most fully the physical sufferings of those whom she tended. But she tried to lose the sense of these—or rather to lessen them, and make them take their appointed places—in thinking of the individuals themselves, as separate from their decaying frames; and all along she had enough self-command to control herself from expressing any sign of re-

pugnance. She allowed herself no nervous haste of movement or touch that should hurt the feelings of the poorest, most friendless creature, who ever lay a victim to disease. There was no rough getting over of all the disagreeable and painful work of her employment. When it was a lessening of pain to have the touch careful and delicate, and the ministration performed with gradual skill, Ruth thought of her charge and not of herself. As she had foretold, she found a use for all her powers. The poor patients themselves were unconsciously gratified and soothed by her harmony and refinement of manner, voice, and gesture. If this harmony and refinement had been merely superficial, it would not have had this balmy effect. That arose from its being the true expression of a kind, modest, and humble spirit. By degrees her reputation as a nurse spread upwards, and many sought her good offices who could well afford to pay for them. Whatever remuneration was offered to her, she took it simply and without comment: for she felt that it was not

hers to refuse; that it was, in fact, owing to the Bensons for her and her child's subsistence. She went wherever her services were first called for. If the poor bricklayer who broke both his legs in a fall from the scaffolding sent for her when she was disengaged, she went and remained with him until he could spare her, let who would be the next claimant. From the happy and prosperous in all but health, she would occasionally beg off, when some one less happy and more friendless wished for her; and sometimes she would ask for a little money from Mr. Benson to give to such in their time of need. But it was astonishing how much she was able to do without money.

Her ways were very quiet; she never spoke much. Any one who has been oppressed with the weight of a vital secret for years, and much more any one the character of whose life has been stamped by one event, and that producing sorrow and shame, is naturally reserved. And yet Ruth's silence was not like reserve; it was too gentle and tender for

that. It had more the effect of a hush of all loud or disturbing emotions, and out of the deep calm the words that came forth had a beautiful power. She did not talk much about religion ; but those who noticed her knew that it was the unseen banner which she was following. The low-breathed sentences which she spoke into the ear of the sufferer and the dying carried them upwards to God.

She gradually became known and respected among the roughest boys of the rough populace of the town. They would make way for her when she passed along the streets with more deference than they used to most ; for all knew something of the tender care with which she had attended this or that sick person, and, besides, she was so often in connexion with Death that something of the superstitious awe with which the dead were regarded by those rough boys in the midst of their strong life, surrounded her.

She herself did not feel changed. She felt just as faulty—as far from being what she wanted to be,

as ever. She best knew how many of her good actions were incomplete, and marred with evil. She did not feel much change from the earliest Ruth she could remember. Everything seemed to change but herself. Mr. and Miss Benson grew old, and Sally grew deaf, and Leonard was shooting up, and Jemima was a mother. She and the distant hills that she saw from her chamber window, seemed the only things which were the same as when she first came to Eccleston. As she sat looking out, and taking her fill of solitude, which sometimes was her most thorough rest—as she sat at the attic window looking abroad—she saw their next-door neighbour carried out to sun himself in his garden. When she first came to Eccleston, this neighbour and his daughter were often seen taking long and regular walks; by-and-by, his walks became shorter, and the attentive daughter would convoy him home, and set out afresh to finish her own. Of late years he had only gone out in the garden behind his house; but at first he had walked

pretty briskly there by his daughter's help—now he was carried, and placed in a large, cushioned, easy-chair, his head remaining where it was placed against the pillow, and hardly moving when his kind daughter, who was now middle-aged, brought him the first roses of the summer. This told Ruth of the lapse of life and time.

Mr. and Mrs. Farquhar were constant in their attentions; but there was no sign of Mr. Bradshaw ever forgiving the imposition which had been practised upon him, and Mr. Benson ceased to hope for any renewal of their intercourse. Still, he thought that he must know of all the kind attentions which Jemima paid to them, and of the fond regard which both she and her husband bestowed on Leonard. This latter feeling even went so far that Mr. Farquhar called one day, and with much diffidence begged Mr. Benson to urge Ruth to let him be sent to school at his (Mr. Farquhar's) expense.

Mr. Benson was taken by surprise, and hesitated. "I do not know. It would be a great advantage

in some respects; and yet I doubt whether it would in others. His mother's influence over him is thoroughly good, and I should fear that any thoughtless allusions to his peculiar position might touch the raw spot in his mind."

"But he is so unusually clever, it seems a shame not to give him all the advantages he can have. Besides, does he see much of his mother now?"

"Hardly a day passes without her coming home to be an hour or so with him, even at her busiest times; she says it is her best refreshment. And often, you know, she is disengaged for a week or two, except the occasional services which she is always rendering to those who need her. Your offer is very tempting, but there is so decidedly another view of the question to be considered, that I believe we must refer it to her."

"With all my heart. Don't hurry her to a decision. Let her weigh it well. I think she will find the advantages preponderate."

"I wonder if I might trouble you with a little business, Mr. Farquhar, as you are here?"

"Certainly; I am only too glad to be of any use to you."

"Why, I see from the report of the Star Life Assurance Company in the *Times*, which you are so good as to send me, that they have declared a bonus on the shares; now it seems strange that I have received no notification of it, and I thought that perhaps it might be lying at your office, as Mr. Bradshaw was the purchaser of the shares, and I have always received the dividends through your firm."

Mr. Farquhar took the newspaper, and ran his eye over the report.

"I've no doubt that's the way of it," said he. "Some of our clerks have been careless about it; or it may be Richard himself. He is not always the most punctual and exact of mortals; but I'll see about it. Perhaps after all it mayn't come for a day or two; they have always such numbers of these circulars to send out."

"Oh! I'm in no hurry about it. I only want to receive it some time before I incur any expenses, which the promise of this bonus may tempt me to indulge in."

Mr. Farquhar took his leave. That evening there was a long conference, for, as it happened, Ruth was at home. She was strenuously against the school plan. She could see no advantages that would counterbalance the evil which she dreaded from any school for Leonard; namely, that the good opinion and regard of the world would assume too high an importance in his eyes. The very idea seemed to produce in her so much shrinking affright, that by mutual consent the subject was dropped; to be taken up again, or not, according to circumstances.

Mr. Farquhar wrote the next morning, on Mr. Benson's behalf, to the Insurance Company, to inquire about the bonus. Although he wrote in the usual formal way, he did not think it necessary to tell Mr. Bradshaw what he had done; for Mr. Ben-

son's name was rarely mentioned between the partners ; each had been made fully aware of the views which the other entertained on the subject that had caused the estrangement; and Mr. Farquhar felt that no external argument could affect Mr. Bradshaw's resolved disapproval and avoidance of his former minister.

As it happened, the answer from the Insurance Company (directed to the firm) was given to Mr. Bradshaw along with the other business letters. It was to the effect that Mr. Benson's shares had been sold and transferred above a twelvemonth ago, which sufficiently accounted for the circumstance that no notification of the bonus had been sent to him.

Mr. Bradshaw tossed the letter on one side, not displeased to have a good reason for feeling a little contempt at the unbusiness-like forgetfulness of Mr. Benson, at whose instance some one had evidently been writing to the Insurance Company. On Mr. Farquhar's entrance he expressed this feeling to him.

" Really," he said, " these Dissenting ministers

have no more notion of exactitude in their affairs than a child! The idea of forgetting that he has sold his shares, and applying for the bonus, when it seems he had transferred them only a year ago!"

Mr. Farquhar was reading the letter while Mr. Bradshaw spoke.

"I don't quite understand it," said he. "Mr. Benson was quite clear about it. He could not have received his half-yearly dividends unless he had been possessed of these shares; and I don't suppose Dissenting ministers, with all their ignorance of business, are unlike other men in knowing whether or not they receive the money that they believe to be owing to them."

"I should not wonder if they were—if Benson was, at any rate. Why, I never knew his watch to be right in all my life—it was always too fast or too slow; it must have been a daily discomfort to him. It ought to have been. Depend upon it, his money matters are just in the same irregular state; no accounts kept, I'll be bound."

"I don't see that that follows," said Mr. Far-

quhar, half amused. "That watch of his is a very curious one—belonged to his father and grandfather. I don't know how far back."

"And the sentimental feelings which he is guided by prompt him to keep it, to the inconvenience of himself and everyone else."

Mr. Farquhar gave up the subject of the watch as hopeless.

"But about this letter. I wrote, at Mr. Benson's desire, to the Insurance Office, and I am not satisfied with this answer. All the transaction has passed through our hands. I do not think it is likely Mr. Benson would write and sell the shares without, at any rate, informing us at the time; even though he forgot all about it afterwards."

"Probably he told Richard, or Mr. Watson."

"We can ask Mr. Watson at once. I am afraid we must wait till Richard comes home, for I don't know where a letter would catch him."

Mr. Bradshaw pulled the bell that rang into the head clerk's room, saying as he did so,

"You may depend upon it, Farquhar, the blun-

der lies with Benson himself. He is just the man to muddle away his money in indiscriminate charity, and then to wonder what has become of it."

Mr. Farquhar was discreet enough to hold his tongue.

"Mr. Watson," said Mr. Bradshaw, as the old clerk made his appearance, "here is some mistake about those Insurance shares we purchased for Benson, ten or a dozen years ago. He spoke to Mr. Farquhar about some bonus they are paying to the shareholders, it seems; and, in reply to Mr. Farquhar's letter, the Insurance Company say the shares were sold twelve months since. Have you any knowledge of the transaction? Has the transfer passed through your hands? By the way" (turning to Mr. Farquhar), "who kept the certificates? Did Benson or we?"

"I really don't know," said Mr. Farquhar. "Perhaps Mr. Watson can tell us."

Mr. Watson meanwhile was studying the letter. When he had ended it, he took off his spectacles, wiped them, and replacing them, he read it again.

"It seems very strange, sir," he said at length, with his trembling, aged voice, "for I paid Mr. Benson the account of the dividends myself last June, and got a receipt in form, and that is since the date of the alleged transfer."

"Pretty nearly twelve months after it took place," said Mr. Farquhar.

"How did you receive the dividends? An order on the Bank, along with old Mrs. Cranmer's?" asked Mr. Bradshaw, sharply.

"I don't know how they came. Mr. Richard gave me the money, and desired me to get the receipt."

"It's unlucky Richard is from home," said Mr. Bradshaw. "He could have cleared up this mystery for us."

Mr. Farquhar was silent.

"Do you know where the certificates were kept, Mr. Watson?" said he.

"I'll not be sure, but I think they were with Mrs. Cranmer's papers and deeds in box A, 24."

"I wish old Cranmer would have made any other

man his executor. She, too, is always coming with some unreasonable request or other."

"Mr. Benson's inquiry about his bonus is perfectly reasonable, at any rate."

Mr. Watson, who was dwelling in the slow fashion of age on what had been said before, now spoke:

"I'll not be sure, but I am almost certain, Mr. Benson said, when I paid him last June, that he thought he ought to give the receipt on a stamp, and had spoken about it to Mr. Richard the time before, but that Mr. Richard said it was of no consequence. Yes," continued he, gathering up his memory as he went on, "he did—I remember now—and I thought to myself that Mr. Richard was but a young man. Mr. Richard will know all about it."

"Yes," said Mr. Farquhar, gravely.

"I sha'n't wait till Richard's return," said Mr. Bradshaw. "We can soon see if the certificates are in the box Watson points out; if they are there,

the Insurance people are no more fit to manage their concern than that cat, and I shall tell them so. If they are not there (as I suspect will prove to be the case), it is just forgetfulness on Benson's part, as I have said from the first."

"You forget the payment of the dividends," said Mr. Farquhar, in a low voice.

"Well, sir! what then?" said Mr. Bradshaw, abruptly. While he spoke—while his eye met Mr. Farquhar's—the hinted meaning of the latter flashed through his mind; but he was only made angry to find that such a suspicion could pass through any one's imagination.

"I suppose I may go, sir," said Watson, respectfully, an uneasy consciousness of what was in Mr. Farquhar's thoughts troubling the faithful old clerk.

"Yes. Go. What do you mean about the dividends?" asked Mr. Bradshaw, impetuously of Mr. Farquhar.

"Simply, that I think there can have been no forgetfulness—no mistake on Mr. Benson's part,"

said Mr. Farquhar; unwilling to put his dim suspicion into words.

"Then of course it is some blunder of that confounded Insurance Company. I will write to them to-day, and make them a little brisker and more correct in their statements."

"Don't you think it would be better to wait till Richard's return? He may be able to explain it."

"No, sir!" said Mr. Bradshaw, sharply. "I do not think it would be better. It has not been my way of doing business to spare any one, or any company, the consequences of their own carelessness; nor to obtain information second-hand when I could have it direct from the source. I shall write to the Insurance Office by the next post."

Mr. Farquhar saw that any further remonstrance on his part would only aggravate his partner's obstinacy; and, besides, it was but a suspicion, an uncomfortable suspicion. It was possible that some of the clerks at the Insurance Office might have made a mistake. Watson was not sure, after all, that the

certificates had been deposited in box A, 24; and when he and Mr. Farquhar could not find them there, the old man drew more and yet more back from his first assertion of belief that they had been placed there.

Mr. Bradshaw wrote an angry and indignant reproach of carelessness to the Insurance Company. By the next mail one of their clerks came down to Eccleston; and having leisurely refreshed himself at the inn, and ordered his dinner with care, he walked up to the great warehouse of Bradshaw and Co., and sent in his card, with a pencil notification, "On the part of the Star Insurance Company," to Mr. Bradshaw himself.

Mr. Bradshaw held the card in his hand for a minute or two without raising his eyes. Then he spoke out loud and firm:

"Desire the gentleman to walk up. Say: I will ring my bell in a minute or two, and then show him up-stairs."

When the errand-boy had closed the door, Mr.

Bradshaw went to a cupboard where he usually kept a glass, and a bottle of wine (of which he very seldom partook, for he was an abstemious man). He intended now to take a glass, but the bottle was empty; and though there was plenty more to be had for ringing, or even simply going into another room, he would not allow himself to do this. He stood and lectured himself in thought.

“ After all, I am a fool for once in my life. If the certificates are in no box which I have yet examined, that does not imply they may not be in some one which I have not had time to search. Farquhar would stay so late last night! And even if they are in none of the boxes here, that does not prove——” He gave the bell a jerking ring, and it was yet sounding when Mr. Smith, the insurance clerk, entered.

The manager of the Insurance Company had been considerably nettled at the tone of Mr. Bradshaw's letter; and had instructed the clerk to assume some dignity at first in vindicating (as it was well in his

power to do) the character of the proceedings of the company, but at the same time he was not to go too far, for the firm of Bradshaw and Co. was daily looming larger in the commercial world, and if any reasonable explanation could be given it was to be received, and bygones be bygones.

"Sit down, sir!" said Mr. Bradshaw.

"You are aware, sir, I presume, that I come on the part of Mr. Dennison, the manager of the Star Insurance Company, to reply in person to a letter of yours, of the 29th, addressed to him?"

Mr. Bradshaw bowed. "A very careless piece of business," he said, stiffly.

"Mr. Dennison does not think you will consider it as such when you have seen the deed of transfer, which I am commissioned to show you."

Mr. Bradshaw took the deed with a steady hand. He wiped his spectacles quietly, without delay, and without hurry, and adjusted them on his nose. It is possible that he was rather long in looking over the document—at least, the clerk had just begun to

wonder if he was reading through the whole of it, instead of merely looking at the signature, when Mr. Bradshaw said : " It is possible that it may be —of course, you will allow me to take this paper to Mr. Benson, to—to inquire if this be his signature?"

" There can be no doubt of it, I think, sir," said the clerk, calmly smiling, for he knew Mr. Benson's signature well.

" I don't know, sir—I don't know." (He was speaking as if the pronunciation of every word required a separate effort of will, like a man who has received a slight paralytic stroke.)

" You have heard, sir, of such a thing as forgery —forgery, sir?" said he, repeating the last word very distinctly; for he feared that the first time he had said it, it was rather slurred over.

" Oh, sir, there is no room for imagining such a thing, I assure you. In our affairs we become aware of curious forgetfulness on the part of those who are not of business habits."

"Still I should like to show it Mr. Benson, to prove to him his forgetfulness, you know. I believe on my soul it is some of his careless forgetfulness—I do, sir," said he. Now he spoke very quickly. "It must have been. Allow me to convince myself. You shall have it back to-night, or the first thing in the morning."

The clerk did not quite like to relinquish the deed, nor yet did he like to refuse Mr. Bradshaw. If that very uncomfortable idea of forgery should have any foundation in truth—and he had given up the writing! There were a thousand chances to one against its being anything but a stupid blunder; the risk was more imminent of offending one of the directors.

As he hesitated, Mr. Bradshaw spoke, very calmly, and almost with a smile on his face. He had regained his self-command. "You are afraid, I see. I assure you, you may trust me. If there has been any fraud—if I have the slightest suspicion of the truth of the surmise I threw out just now"—

he could not quite speak the bare naked word that was chilling his heart—"I will not fail to aid the ends of justice, even though the culprit should be my own son."

He ended, as he began, with a smile—such a smile!—the stiff lips refused to relax and cover the teeth. But all the time he kept saying to himself:

"I don't believe it—I don't believe it. I'm convinced it's a blunder of that old fool Benson."

But when he had dismissed the clerk, and secured the piece of paper, he went and locked the door, and laid his head on his desk, and moaned aloud.

He had lingered in the office for the two previous nights; at first, occupying himself in searching for the certificates of the Insurance shares; but, when all the boxes and other repositories for papers had been ransacked, the thought took hold of him that they might be in Richard's private desk; and, with the determination which overlooks the means to get at the end, he had first tried all his own keys on the complicated lock, and then broken it

open with two decided blows of a poker, the instrument nearest at hand. He did not find the certificates. Richard had always considered himself careful in destroying any dangerous or tell-tale papers; but the stern father found enough, in what remained, to convince him that his pattern son—more even than his pattern son, his beloved pride—was far other than what he seemed.

Mr. Bradshaw did not skip or miss a word. He did not shrink while he read. He folded up letter by letter; he snuffed the candle just when its light began to wane, and no sooner; but he did not miss or omit one paper—he read every word. Then, leaving the letters in a heap upon the table, and the broken desk to tell its own tale, he locked the door of the room which was appropriated to his son as junior partner, and carried the key away with him.

There was a faint hope, even after this discovery of many circumstances of Richard's life which shocked and dismayed his father—there was still a faint hope that he might not be guilty of forgery—

that it might be no forgery after all—only a blunder—an omission—a stupendous piece of forgetfulness. That hope was the one straw that Mr. Bradshaw clung to.

Late that night Mr. Benson sat in his study. Everyone else in the house had gone to bed; but he was expecting a summons to some one who was dangerously ill. He was not startled, therefore, at the knock which came to the front door about twelve; but he was rather surprised at the character of the knock, so slow and loud, with a pause between each rap. His study-door was but a step from that which led into the street. He opened it, and there stood—Mr. Bradshaw; his large, portly figure not to be mistaken even in the dusky night.

He said, "That is right. It was you I wanted to see." And he walked straight into the study. Mr. Benson followed, and shut the door. Mr. Bradshaw was standing by the table, fumbling in his pocket. He pulled out the deed; and opening it, after a

pause, in which you might have counted five, he held it out to Mr. Benson.

"Read it!" said he. He spoke not another word until time had been allowed for its perusal. Then he added:

"That is your signature?" The words were an assertion, but the tone was that of question.

"No, it is not," said Mr. Benson, decidedly. "It is very like my writing. I could almost say it was mine, but I know it is not."

"Recollect yourself a little. The date is August the third, of last year, fourteen months ago. You may have forgotten it." The tone of the voice had a kind of eager entreaty in it, which Mr. Benson did not notice,—he was so startled at the fetch of his own writing.

"It is most singularly like mine; but I could not have signed away these shares—all the property I have—without the slightest remembrance of it."

"Stranger things have happened. For the love of Heaven, think if you did not sign it. It's a

deed of transfer for those Insurance shares, you see. You don't remember it? You did not write this name—these words?" He looked at Mr. Benson with craving wistfulness for one particular answer. Mr. Benson was struck at last by the whole proceeding, and glanced anxiously at Mr. Bradshaw, whose manner, gait, and voice were so different from usual that he might well excite attention. But as soon as the latter was aware of this momentary inspection, he changed his tone all at once.

"Don't imagine, sir, I wish to force any invention upon you as a remembrance. If you did not write this name, I know who did. Once more I ask you,—does no glimmering recollection of—having needed money, we'll say—I never wanted you to refuse my subscription to the chapel, God knows!—of having sold these accursed shares?—Oh! I see by your face you did not write it; you need not speak to me—I know."

He sank down into a chair near him. His whole figure drooped. In a moment he was up,

and standing straight as an arrow, confronting Mr. Benson, who could find no clue to this stern man's agitation.

"You say you did not write these words?" pointing to the signature, with an untrembling finger. "I believe you; Richard Bradshaw did write them."

"My dear sir—my dear old friend!" exclaimed Mr. Benson, "you are rushing to a conclusion for which, I am convinced, there is no foundation; there is no reason to suppose that because——"

"There is reason, sir. Do not distress yourself—I am perfectly calm." His stony eyes and immovable face did indeed look rigid. "What we have now to do is to punish the offence. I have not one standard for myself and those I love—(and Mr. Benson, I did love him)—and another for the rest of the world. If a stranger had forged my name, I should have known it was my duty to prosecute him. You must prosecute Richard."

"I will not," said Mr. Benson.

“ You think, perhaps, that I shall feel it acutely. You are mistaken. He is no longer as my son to me. I have always resolved to disown any child of mine who was guilty of sin. I disown Richard. He is as a stranger to me. I shall feel no more at his exposure—his punishment——” He could not go on, for his voice was choking. “ Of course, you understand that I must feel shame at our connexion ; it is that that is troubling me ; that is but consistent with a man who has always prided himself on the integrity of his name ; but as for that boy, who has been brought up all his life as I have brought up my children, it must be some innate wickedness ! Sir, I can cut him off, though he has been as my right-hand—beloved. Let me be no hindrance to the course of justice, I beg. He has forged your name—he has defrauded you of money—of your all, I think you said.”

“ Some one has forged my name. I am not convinced that it was your son. Until I know all the circumstances, I decline to prosecute.”

"What circumstances?" asked Mr. Bradshaw, in an authoritative manner, which would have shown irritation but for his self-command.

"The force of the temptation—the previous habits of the person——"

"Of Richard. He is the person," Mr. Bradshaw put in.

Mr. Benson went on, without taking any notice. "I should think it right to prosecute, if I found out that this offence against me was only one of a series committed, with premeditation, against society. I should then feel, as a protector of others more helpless than myself——"

"It was your all," said Mr. Bradshaw.

"It was all my money; it was not my all," replied Mr. Benson; and then he went on as if the interruption had never been: "Against an habitual offender. I shall not prosecute Richard. Not because he is your son—do not imagine that! I should decline taking such a step against any young man without first ascer-

taining the particulars about him, which I know already about Richard, and which determine me against doing what would blast his character for life—would destroy every good quality he has.”

“What good quality remains to him?” asked Mr. Bradshaw. “He has deceived me—he has offended God.”

“Have we not all offended Him?” Mr. Benson said, in a low tone.

“Not consciously. I never do wrong consciously. But Richard—Richard.” The remembrance of the undeceiving letters—the forgery—filled up his heart so completely that he could not speak for a minute or two. Yet when he saw Mr. Benson on the point of saying something, he broke in :

“It is no use talking, sir. You and I cannot agree on these subjects. Once more, I desire you to prosecute that boy, who is no longer a child of mine ”

“Mr. Bradshaw, I shall not prosecute him. I have said it once for all. To-morrow you will be

glad that I do not listen to you. I should only do harm by saying more at present."

There is always something aggravating in being told, that the mood in which we are now viewing things strongly will not be our mood at some other time. It implies that our present feelings are blinding us, and that some more clearsighted spectator is able to distinguish our future better than we do ourselves. The most shallow person dislikes to be told that any one can gauge his depth. Mr. Bradshaw was not soothed by this last remark of Mr. Benson's. He stooped down to take up his hat and be gone. Mr. Benson saw his dizzy way of groping, and gave him what he sought for; but he received no word of thanks. Mr. Bradshaw went silently towards the door, but, just as he got there, he turned round, and said:

"If there were more people like me, and fewer like you, there would be less evil in the world, sir. It's your sentimentalists that nurse up sin."

Although Mr. Benson had been very calm dur-

ing this interview, he had been much shocked by what had been let out respecting Richard's forgery; not by the fact itself so much as by what it was a sign of. Still he had known the young man from childhood, and had seen, and often regretted, that his want of moral courage had rendered him peculiarly liable to all the bad effects arising from his father's severe and arbitrary mode of treatment. Dick would never have had "pluck" enough to be a hardened villain, under any circumstances; but, unless some good influence, some strength, was brought to bear upon him, he might easily sink into the sneaking scoundrel. Mr. Benson determined to go to Mr. Farquhar's the first thing in the morning, and consult him as a calm, clear-headed family friend—partner in the business, as well as son and brother-in-law to the people concerned.

CHAPTER VII.

WHILE Mr. Benson lay awake for fear of oversleeping himself, and so being late at Mr. Farquhar's (it was somewhere about six o'clock—dark as an October morning is at that time), Sally came to his door and knocked. She was always an early riser; and if she had not been gone to bed long before Mr. Bradshaw's visit last night, Mr. Benson might safely have trusted to her calling him.

"Here's a woman down below as must see you directly. She'll be up-stairs after me if you're not down quick."

"Is it any one from Clarke's?"

"No, no! not it, master," said she, through the keyhole; "I reckon it's Mrs. Bradshaw, for all she's muffled up."

He needed no other word. When he went down, Mrs. Bradshaw sat in his easy-chair, swaying her body to and fro, and crying without restraint. Mr. Benson came up to her, before she was aware that he was there.

"Oh! sir," said she, getting up and taking hold of both his hands, "you won't be so cruel, will you? I have got some money somewhere—some money my father settled on me, sir; I don't know how much, but I think it's more than two thousand pounds, and you shall have it all. If I can't give it you now, I'll make a will, sir. Only be merciful to poor Dick—don't go and prosecute him, sir."

"My dear Mrs. Bradshaw, don't agitate yourself in this way. I never meant to prosecute him."

"But Mr. Bradshaw says that you must."

"I shall not, indeed. I have told Mr. Bradshaw so."

"Has he been here? Oh! is not he cruel? I don't care. I have been a good wife till now. I know I have. I have done all he bid me, ever

since we were married. But now I will speak my mind, and say to everybody how cruel he is—how hard to his own flesh and blood! If he puts poor Dick in prison, I will go too. If I'm to choose between my husband and my son, I choose my son; for he will have no friends, unless I am with him."

"Mr. Bradshaw will think better of it. You will see, that, when his first anger and disappointment are over, he will not be hard or cruel."

"You don't know Mr. Bradshaw," said she, mournfully, "if you think he'll change. I might beg and beg—I have done many a time, when we had little children, and I wanted to save them a whipping—but no begging ever did any good. At last I left it off. He'll not change."

"Perhaps not for human entreaty. Mrs. Bradshaw, is there nothing more powerful?"

The tone of his voice suggested what he did not say.

"If you mean that God may soften his heart," replied she, humbly, "I'm not going to deny God's

power—I have need to think of Him,” she continued, bursting into fresh tears, “for I am a very miserable woman. Only think! he cast it up against me last night, and said, if I had not spoilt Dick this never would have happened.”

“He hardly knew what he was saying, last night. I will go to Mr. Farquhar’s directly, and see him; and you had better go home, my dear Mrs. Bradshaw; you may rely upon our doing all that we can.”

With some difficulty he persuaded her not to accompany him to Mr. Farquhar’s; but he had, indeed, to take her to her own door before he could convince her that, at present, she could do nothing but wait the result of the consultations of others.

It was before breakfast, and Mr. Farquhar was alone; so Mr. Benson had a quiet opportunity of telling the whole story to the husband before the wife came down. Mr. Farquhar was not much surprised, though greatly distressed. The general opinion he had always entertained of Richard’s

character had predisposed him to fear, even before the inquiry respecting the Insurance shares. But it was still a shock when it came, however much it might have been anticipated.

"What can we do?" said Mr. Benson, as Mr. Farquhar sat gloomily silent.

"That is just what I was asking myself. I think I must see Mr. Bradshaw, and try and bring him a little out of this unmerciful frame of mind. That must be the first thing. Will you object to accompany me at once? It seems of particular consequence that we should subdue his obduracy before the affair gets wind."

"I will go with you willingly. But I believe I rather serve to irritate Mr. Bradshaw; he is reminded of things he has said to me formerly, and which he thinks he is bound to act up to. However, I can walk with you to the door, and wait for you (if you'll allow me) in the street. I want to know how he is to-day, both bodily and mentally;

for indeed, Mr. Farquhar, I should not have been surprised last night if he had dropped down dead, so terrible was his strain upon himself."

Mr. Benson was left at the door as he had desired, while Mr. Farquhar went in.

"Oh, Mr. Farquhar, what is the matter?" exclaimed the girls, running to him. "Mamma sits crying in the old nursery. We believe she has been there all night. She will not tell us what it is, nor let us be with her; and papa is locked up in his room, and won't even answer us when we speak, though we know he is up and awake, for we heard him tramping about all night."

"Let me go up to him!" said Mr. Farquhar.

"He won't let you in. It will be of no use." But in spite of what they said, he went up; and, to their surprise, after hearing who it was, their father opened the door, and admitted their brother-in-law. He remained with Mr. Bradshaw about half an hour, and then came into the dining-room, where the two girls stood huddled over the fire, regardless

of the untasted breakfast behind them; and, writing a few lines, he desired them to take his note up to their mother, saying that it would comfort her a little, and that he should send Jemima, in two or three hours, with the baby—perhaps to remain some days with them. He had no time to tell them more; Jemima would.

He left them, and rejoined Mr. Benson. "Come home and breakfast with me. I am off to London in an hour or two, and must speak with you first."

On reaching his house, he ran up-stairs to ask Jemima to breakfast alone in her dressing-room, and returned in five minutes or less.

"Now I can tell you about it," said he. "I see my way clearly to a certain point. We must prevent Dick and his father meeting just now, or all hope of Dick's reformation is gone for ever. His father is as hard as the nether mill-stone. He has forbidden me his house."

"Forbidden you!"

"Yes; because I would not give up Dick as

utterly lost and bad; and because I said I should return to London with the clerk, and fairly tell Dennison (he's a Scotchman, and a man of sense and feeling) the real state of the case. By the way, we must not say a word to the clerk; otherwise he will expect an answer, and make out all sorts of inferences for himself, from the unsatisfactory reply he must have. Dennison will be upon honour—will see every side of the case—will know you refuse to prosecute; the company of which he is manager are no losers. Well! when I said what I thought wise, of all this—when I spoke as if my course were a settled and decided thing, the grim old man asked me if he was to be an automaton in his own house. He assured me he had no feeling for Dick—all the time he was shaking like an aspen; in short, repeated much the same things he must have said to you last night. However, I defied him; and the consequence is, I'm forbidden the house, and, what is more, he says he will not come to the office while I remain a partner."

“What shall you do?”

“Send Jemima and the baby. There’s nothing like a young child for bringing people round to a healthy state of feeling; and you don’t know what Jemima is, Mr. Benson! No! though you’ve known her from her birth. If she can’t comfort her mother, and if the baby can’t steal into her grandfather’s heart, why—I don’t know what you may do to me. I shall tell Jemima all, and trust to her wit and wisdom to work at this end, while I do my best at the other.”

“Richard is abroad, is not he?”

“He will be in England to-morrow. I must catch him somewhere; but that I can easily do. The difficult point will be, what to do with him—what to say to him, when I find him. He must give up his partnership, that’s clear. I did not tell his father so, but I am resolved upon it. There shall be no tampering with the honour of the firm to which I belong.”

“But what will become of him?” asked Mr. Benson, anxiously.

"I do not yet know. But, for Jemima's sake—for his dear old father's sake—I will not leave him adrift. I will find him some occupation as clear from temptation as I can. I will do all in my power. And he will do much better, if he has any good in him, as a freer agent, not cowed by his father into a want of individuality and self-respect. I believe I must dismiss you, Mr. Benson," said he, looking at his watch; "I have to explain all to my wife, and to go to that clerk. You shall hear from me in a day or two."

Mr. Benson half envied the younger man's elasticity of mind, and power of acting promptly. He himself felt as if he wanted to sit down in his quiet study, and think over the revelations and events of the last twenty-four hours. It made him dizzy even to follow Mr. Farquhar's plans, as he had briefly detailed them; and some solitude and consideration would be required before Mr. Benson could decide upon their justice and wisdom. He had been much shocked by the discovery of the overt act of guilt

which Richard had perpetrated, low as his opinion of that young man had been for some time; and the consequence was, that he felt depressed, and unable to rally for the next few days. He had not even the comfort of his sister's sympathy, as he felt bound in honour not to tell her anything; and she was luckily so much absorbed in some household contest with Sally that she did not notice her brother's quiet languor.

Mr. Benson felt that he had no right at this time to intrude into the house which he had been once tacitly forbidden. If he went now to Mr. Bradshaw's without being asked, or sent for, he thought it would seem like presuming on his knowledge of the hidden disgrace of one of the family. Yet he longed to go: he knew that Mr. Farquhar must be writing almost daily to Jemima, and he wanted to hear what he was doing. The fourth day after her husband's departure she came, within half an hour after the post-delivery, and asked to speak to Mr. Benson alone.

She was in a state of great agitation, and had evidently been crying very much.

"Oh, Mr. Benson!" said she, "will you come with me, and tell papa this sad news about Dick. Walter has written me a letter at last, to say he has found him—he could not at first; but now it seems that, the day before yesterday, he heard of an accident which had happened to the Dover coach; it was overturned—two passengers killed, and several badly hurt. Walter says we ought to be thankful, as he is, that Dick was not killed. He says it was such a relief to him on going to the place—the little inn nearest to where the coach was overturned—to find that Dick was only severely injured; not one of those who was killed. But it is a terrible shock to us all. We had had no more dreadful fear to lessen the shock; mamma is quite unfit for anything, and we none of us dare to tell papa." Jemima had hard work to keep down her sobs thus far, and now they overmastered her.

"How is your father ? I have wanted to hear every day," asked Mr. Benson, tenderly.

"It was careless of me not to come and tell you; but, indeed, I have had so much to do. Mamma would not go near him. He has said something which she seems as if she could not forgive. Because he came to meals, she would not. She has almost lived in the nursery; taking out all Dick's old playthings, and what clothes of his were left, and turning them over, and crying over them."

"Then Mr. Bradshaw has joined you again; I was afraid, from what Mr. Farquhar said, he was going to isolate himself from you all?"

"I wish he had," said Jemima, crying afresh. "It would have been more natural than the way he has gone on; the only difference from his usual habits is, that he has never gone near the office, or else he has come to meals just as usual, and talked just as usual; and even done what I never knew him do before, tried to make jokes—all in order to show us how little he cares."

“ Does he not go out at all?”

“ Only in the garden. I am surè he does care after all ; he must care ; he cannot shake off a child in this way, though he thinks he can ; and that makes me so afraid of telling him of this accident. Will you come, Mr. Benson ?”

He needed no other word. He went with her, as she rapidly threaded her way through the by-streets. When they reached the house, she went in without knocking, and putting her husband's letter into Mr. Benson's hand, she opened the door of her father's room, and saying—“ Papa, here is Mr. Benson,” left them alone.

Mr. Benson felt nervously incapable of knowing what to do, or to say. He had surprised Mr. Bradshaw sitting idly over the fire—gazing dreamily into the embers. But he had started up, and drawn his chair to the table, on seeing his visitor ; and, after the first necessary words of politeness were over, he seemed to expect him to open the conversation.

"Mrs. Farquhar has asked me," said Mr. Benson, plunging into the subject with a trembling heart, "to tell you about a letter she has received from her husband;" he stopped for an instant, for he felt that he did not get nearer the real difficulty, and yet could not tell the best way of approaching it.

"She need not have given you that trouble. I am aware of the reason of Mr. Farquhar's absence. I entirely disapprove of his conduct. He is regardless of my wishes; and disobedient to the commands which, as my son-in-law, I thought he would have felt bound to respect. If there is any more agreeable subject that you can introduce, I shall be glad to hear you, sir."

"Neither you, nor I, must think of what we like to hear or to say. You must hear what concerns your son."

"I have disowned the young man who was my son," replied he, coldly.

"The Dover coach has been overturned," said

Mr. Benson, stimulated into abruptness by the icy sternness of the father. But, in a flash, he saw what lay below that terrible assumption of indifference. Mr. Bradshaw glanced up in his face one look of agony—and then went grey-pale; so livid that Mr. Benson got up to ring the bell in affright, but Mr. Bradshaw motioned to him to sit still.

“ Oh! I have been too sudden, sir—he is alive, he is alive!” he exclaimed, as he saw the ashy face working in a vain attempt to speak; but the poor lips (so wooden, not a minute ago) went working on and on, as if Mr. Benson’s words did not sink down into the mind, or reach the understanding. Mr. Benson went hastily for Mrs. Farquhar.

“ Oh, Jemima!” said he, “ I have done it so badly—I have been so cruel—he is very ill, I fear—bring water, brandy——” and he returned with all speed into the room. Mr. Bradshaw—the great, strong, iron man—lay back in his chair in a swoon, a fit.

“ Fetch my mother, Mary. Send for the doctor,

Elizabeth," said Jemima, rushing to her father. She and Mr. Benson did all in their power to restore him. Mrs. Bradshaw forgot all her vows of estrangement from the dead-like husband, who might never speak to her, or hear her again, and bitterly accused herself for every angry word she had spoken against him during these last few miserable days.

Before the doctor came, Mr. Bradshaw had opened his eyes and partially rallied, although he either did not, or could not speak. He looked struck down into old age. His eyes were sensible in their expression, but had the dim glaze of many years of life upon them. His lower jaw fell from his upper one, giving a look of melancholy depression to the face, although the lips hid the unclosed teeth. But he answered correctly (in monosyllables, it is true) all the questions which the doctor chose to ask. And the medical man was not so much impressed with the serious character of the seizure as the family, who knew all the hidden mystery be-

hind, and had seen their father lie for the first time with the precursor aspect of death upon his face. Rest, watching, and a little medicine were what the doctor prescribed ; it was so slight a prescription, for what had appeared to Mr. Benson so serious an attack, that he wished to follow the medical man out of the room to make further inquiries, and learn the real opinion which he thought must lurk behind. But as he was following the doctor, he—they all—were aware of the effort Mr. Bradshaw was making to rise, in order to arrest Mr. Benson's departure. He did stand up, supporting himself with one hand on the table, for his legs shook under him. Mr. Benson came back instantly to the spot where he was. For a moment, it seemed as if he had not the right command of his voice : but at last he said, with a tone of humble, wistful entreaty, which was very touching :

“ He is alive, sir, is he not ? ”

“ Yes, sir—indeed he is ; he is only hurt. He

is sure to do well. Mr. Farquhar is with him," said Mr. Benson, almost unable to speak for tears.

Mr. Bradshaw did not remove his eyes from Mr. Benson's face for more than a minute after his question had been answered. He seemed as though he would read his very soul, and there see if he spoke the truth. Satisfied at last, he sank slowly into his chair; and they were silent for a little space, waiting to perceive if he would wish for any further information just then. At length he put his hands slowly together in the clasped attitude of prayer, and said—"Thank God!"

CHAPTER VIII.

IF Jemima allowed herself now and then to imagine that one good would result from the discovery of Richard's delinquency, in the return of her father and Mr. Benson to something of their old understanding and their old intercourse—if this hope fluttered through her mind, it was doomed to disappointment. Mr. Benson would have been most happy to go, if Mr. Bradshaw had sent for him; he was on the watch for what might be even the shadow of such an invitation—but none came. Mr. Bradshaw, on his part, would have been thoroughly glad if the wilful seclusion of his present life could have been broken by the occasional visits of the old friend whom he had once forbidden the house; but this prohibition having passed his

lips, he stubbornly refused to do anything which might be construed into unsaying it. Jemima was for some time in despair of his ever returning to the office, or resuming his old habits of business. He had evidently threatened as much to her husband. All that Jemima could do was to turn a deaf ear to every allusion to this menace, which he threw out from time to time, evidently with a view to see if it had struck deep enough into her husband's mind for him to have repeated it to his wife. If Mr. Farquhar had named it—if it was known only to two or three to have been, but for one half hour even, his resolution—Mr. Bradshaw could have adhered to it, without any other reason than the maintenance of what he called consistency, but which was in fact doggedness. Jemima was often thankful that her mother was absent, and gone to nurse her son. If she had been at home, she would have entreated and implored her husband to fall back into his usual habits, and would have shown such a dread of his being as good as his

word, that he would have been compelled to adhere to it by the very consequence affixed to it. Mr. Farquhar had hard work, as it was, in passing rapidly enough between the two places—attending to his business at Ecclestone; and deciding, comforting, and earnestly talking, in Richard's sick-room. During an absence of his, it was necessary to apply to one of the partners on some matter of importance; and accordingly, to Jemima's secret joy, Mr. Watson came up and asked, if her father was well enough to see him on business? Jemima carried in this inquiry literally; and the hesitating answer which her father gave was in the affirmative. It was not long before she saw him leave the house, accompanied by the faithful old clerk; and when he met her at dinner, he made no allusion to his morning visitor, or to his subsequent going out. But from that time forwards he went regularly to the office. He received all the information about Dick's accident, and his progress towards recovery,

in perfect silence, and in as indifferent a manner as he could assume; but yet he lingered about the family sitting-room every morning until the post had come in which brought all letters from the south.

When Mr. Farquhar at last returned to bring the news of Dick's perfect convalescence, he resolved to tell Mr. Bradshaw all that he had done and arranged, for his son's future career; but, as Mr. Farquhar told Mr. Benson afterwards, he could not really say if Mr. Bradshaw had attended to one word that he said.

"Rely upon it," said Mr. Benson, "he has not only attended to it, but treasured up every expression you have used."

"Well, I tried to get some opinion, or sign of emotion, out of him. I had not much hope of the latter, I must own; but I thought he would have said whether I had done wisely or not in procuring that Glasgow situation for Dick—that he would, perhaps, have been indignant at my ousting him

from the partnership so entirely on my own responsibility."

"How did Richard take it?"

"Oh, nothing could exceed his penitence. If one had never heard of the proverb, 'When the devil was sick, the devil a monk would be,' I should have had greater faith in him; or if he had had more strength of character to begin with, or more reality and less outward appearance of good principle instilled into him. However, this Glasgow situation is the very thing; clear, defined duties, no great trust reposed in him, a kind and watchful head, and introductions to a better class of associates than I fancy he has ever been thrown amongst before. For, you know, Mr. Bradshaw dreaded all intimacies for his son, and wanted him to eschew all society beyond his own family—would never allow him to ask a friend home. Really, when I think of the unnatural life Mr. Bradshaw expected him to lead, I get into charity with him, and have hopes. By the way, have you ever succeeded in persuading

his mother to send Leonard to school? He may run the same risk from isolation as Dick: not be able to choose his companions wisely when he grows up, but be too much overcome by the excitement of society to be very discreet as to who are his associates. Have you spoken to her about my plan?"

"Yes! but to no purpose. I cannot say that she would even admit an argument on the subject. She seemed to have an invincible repugnance to the idea of exposing him to the remarks of other boys on his peculiar position."

"They need never know of it. Besides, sooner or later, he must step out of his narrow circle, and encounter remark and scorn."

"True," said Mr. Benson, mournfully. "And you may depend upon it, if it really is the best for Leonard, she will come round to it by-and-by. It is almost extraordinary to see the way in which her earnest and most unselfish devotion to this boy's real welfare leads her to right and wise conclusions."

“ I wish I could tame her so as to let me meet her as a friend. Since the baby was born, she comes to see Jemima. My wife tells me, that she sits and holds it soft in her arms, and talks to it as if her whole soul went out to the little infant. But if she hears a strange footstep on the stair, what Jemima calls the ‘ wild-animal look ’ comes back into her eyes, and she steals away like some frightened creature. With all that she has done to redeem her character, she should not be so timid of observation.”

“ You may well say ‘ with all that she has done ! ’ We of her own household hear little or nothing of what she does. If she wants help, she simply tells us how and why ; but if not—perhaps because it is some relief to her to forget for a time the scenes of suffering in which she has been acting the part of comforter, and perhaps because there always was a shy, sweet reticence about her—we never should know what she is and what she does, except from

the poor people themselves, who would bless her in words if the very thought of her did not choke them with tears. Yet, I do assure you, she passes out of all this gloom, and makes sunlight in our house. We are never so cheerful as when she is at home. She always had the art of diffusing peace, but now it is positive cheerfulness. And about Leonard; I doubt if the wisest and most thoughtful schoolmaster could teach half as much directly, as his mother does unconsciously and indirectly every hour that he is with her. Her noble, humble, pious endurance of the consequences of what was wrong in her early life, seems expressly fitted to act upon him, whose position is (unjustly, for he has done no harm) so similar to hers."

"Well! I suppose we must leave it alone for the present. You will think me a hard practical man when I own to you, that all I expect from Leonard's remaining a home-bird is that, with such a mother, it will do him no harm. At any rate, remember

my offer is the same for a year—two years hence, as now. What does she look forward to making him into, finally ?”

“ I don’t know. The wonder comes into my mind sometimes ; but never into hers, I think. It is part of her character—part perhaps of that which made her what she was—that she never looks forward, and seldom back. The present is enough for her.”

And so the conversation ended. When Mr. Benson repeated the substance of it to his sister, she mused awhile, breaking out into an occasional whistle (although she had cured herself of this habit in a great measure), and at last she said :

“ Now, do you know, I never liked poor Dick ; and yet I’m angry with Mr. Farquhar for getting him out of the partnership in such a summary way. I can’t get over it, even though he has offered to send Leonard to school. And here he’s reigning lord-paramount at the office ! As if you, Thurstan,

weren't as well able to teach him as any school-master in England! But I should not mind that affront, if I were not sorry to think of Dick (though I never could abide him) labouring away in Glasgow for a petty salary of nobody knows how little, while Mr. Farquhar is taking halves, instead of thirds, of the profits here!"

But her brother could not tell her—and even Jemima did not know, till long afterwards—that the portion of income which would have been Dick's as a junior partner, if he had remained in the business, was carefully laid aside for him by Mr. Farquhar; to be delivered up, with all its accumulated interest, when the prodigal should have proved his penitence by his conduct.

When Ruth had no call upon her time, it was indeed a holiday at Chapel-house. She threw off as much as she could of the care and the sadness in which she had been sharing; and returned fresh and helpful, ready to go about in her soft, quiet way,

and fill up every measure of service, and heap it with the fragrance of her own sweet nature. The delicate mending, that the elder women could no longer see to do, was put by for Ruth's swift and nimble fingers. The occasional copying, or patient writing to dictation, that gave rest to Mr. Benson's weary spine, was done by her with sunny alacrity. But, most of all, Leonard's heart rejoiced when his mother came home. Then came the quiet confidences, the tender exchange of love, the happy walks from which he returned stronger and stronger—going from strength to strength as his mother led the way. It was well, as they saw now, that the great shock of the disclosure had taken place when it did. She, for her part, wondered at her own cowardliness in having even striven to keep back the truth from her child—the truth that was so certain to be made clear, sooner or later, and which it was only owing to God's mercy that she was alive to encounter with him, and, by so encountering, shield and give

him good courage. Moreover, in her secret heart, she was thankful that all occurred while he was yet too young to have much curiosity as to his father. If an unsatisfied feeling of this kind occasionally stole into his mind, at any rate she never heard any expression of it; for the past was a sealed book between them. And so, in the bright strength of good endeavour, the days went on, and grew again to months and years.

Perhaps one little circumstance which occurred during this time had scarcely external importance enough to be called an event; but in Mr. Benson's mind it took rank as such. One day, about a year after Richard Bradshaw had ceased to be a partner in his father's house, Mr. Benson encountered Mr. Farquhar in the street, and heard from him of the creditable and respectable manner in which Richard was conducting himself in Glasgow, where Mr. Farquhar had lately been on business.

"I am determined to tell his father of this," said

he; "I think his family are far too obedient to his tacit prohibition of all mention of Richard's name."

"Tacit prohibition?" inquired Mr. Benson.

"Oh! I dare say I use the words in a wrong sense for the correctness of a scholar; but what I mean is, that he made a point of immediately leaving the room if Richard's name was mentioned; and did it in so marked a manner, that by degrees they understood that it was their father's desire that he should never be alluded to; which was all very well as long as there was nothing pleasant to be said about him; but to-night I am going there, and shall take good care he does not escape me before I have told him all I have heard and observed about Richard. He will never be a hero of virtue, for his education has drained him of all moral courage; but with care, and the absence of all strong temptation for a time, he will do very well; nothing to gratify paternal pride, but certainly nothing to be ashamed of."

It was on the Sunday after this that the little circumstance to which I have alluded took place.

During the afternoon service, Mr. Benson became aware that the large Bradshaw pew was no longer unoccupied. In a dark corner Mr. Bradshaw's white head was to be seen, bowed down low in prayer. When last he had worshipped there, the hair on that head was iron-grey, and even in prayer he had stood erect, with an air of conscious righteousness sufficient for all his wants, and even some to spare with which to judge others. Now, that white and hoary head was never uplifted; part of his unobtrusiveness might, it is true, be attributed to the uncomfortable feeling which was sure to attend any open withdrawal of the declaration he had once made, never to enter the chapel in which Mr. Benson was minister again; and, as such a feeling was natural to all men, and especially to such a one as Mr. Bradshaw, Mr. Benson instinctively respected it, and passed out of the chapel with his household,

without ever directing his regards to the obscure place where Mr. Bradshaw still remained immovable.

From this day Mr. Benson felt sure that the old friendly feeling existed once more between them, although some time might elapse before any circumstance gave the signal for a renewal of their intercourse.

CHAPTER IX.

OLD people tell of certain years when typhus fever swept over the country like a pestilence; years that bring back the remembrance of deep sorrow—refusing to be comforted—to many a household; and which those whose beloved passed through the fiery time unscathed, shrink from recalling: for great and tremulous was the anxiety—miserable the constant watching for evil symptoms; and beyond the threshold of home a dense cloud of depression hung over society at large. It seemed as if the alarm was proportionate to the previous light-heartedness of fancied security—and indeed it was so; for, since the days of King Belshazzar, the solemn decrees of Doom have ever seemed most terrible when they awe into silence the merry

revellers of life. So it was this year to which I come in the progress of my story.

The summer had been unusually gorgeous. Some had complained of the steaming heat, but others had pointed to the lush vegetation, which was profuse and luxuriant. The early autumn was wet and cold, but people did not regard it, in contemplation of some proud rejoicing of the nation, which filled every newspaper and gave food to every tongue. In Eccleston these rejoicings were greater than in most places ; for, by the national triumph of arms, it was supposed that a new market for the staple manufacture of the place would be opened ; and so the trade, which had for a year or two been languishing, would now revive with redoubled vigour. Besides these legitimate causes of good spirits, there was the rank excitement of a coming election, in consequence of Mr. Donne having accepted a Government office, procured for him by one of his influential relations. This time, the Cranworths roused themselves from their magni-

ficent torpor of security in good season, and were going through a series of pompous and ponderous hospitalities, in order to bring back the Eccleston voters to their allegiance.

While the town was full of these subjects by turns—now thinking and speaking of the great revival of trade—now of the chances of the election, as yet some weeks distant—now of the balls at Cranworth Court, in which Mr. Cranworth Cranworth had danced with all the belles of the shopocracy of Eccleston—there came creeping, creeping, in hidden, slimy courses, the terrible fever—that fever which is never utterly banished from the sad haunts of vice and misery, but lives in such darkness, like a wild beast in the recesses of his den. It had begun in the low Irish lodging-houses ; but there it was so common it excited little attention. The poor creatures died almost without the attendance of the unwarned medical men, who received their first notice of the spreading plague from the Roman Catholic priests.

Before the medical men of Eccleston had had time to meet together and consult, and compare the knowledge of the fever which they had severally gained, it had, like the blaze of a fire which had long smouldered, burst forth in many places at once—not merely among the loose-living and vicious, but among the decently poor—nay, even among the well-to-do and respectable. And, to add to the horror, like all similar pestilences, its course was most rapid at first, and was fatal in the great majority of cases—hopeless from the beginning. There was a cry, and then a deep silence, and then rose the long wail of the survivors.

A portion of the Infirmary of the town was added to that already set apart for a fever ward; the smitten were carried thither at once, whenever it was possible, in order to prevent the spread of infection; and on that lazar-house was concentrated all the medical skill and force of the place.

But when one of the physicians had died, in consequence of his attendance—when the customary

staff of matrons and nurses had been swept off in two days—and the nurses belonging to the Infirmary had shrunk from being drafted into the pestilential fever-ward—when high wages had failed to tempt any to what, in their panic, they considered as certain death—when the doctors stood aghast at the swift mortality among the untended sufferers, who were dependent only on the care of the most ignorant hirelings, too brutal to recognise the solemnity of Death (all this had happened within a week from the first acknowledgment of the presence of the plague)—Ruth came one day, with a quieter step than usual, into Mr. Benson's study, and told him she wanted to speak to him for a few minutes.

“To be sure, my dear! Sit down!” said he; for she was standing and leaning her head against the chimney-piece, idly gazing into the fire. She went on standing there, as if she had not heard his words; and it was a few moments before she began to speak. Then she said:

“I want to tell you, that I have been this morn-

ing and offered myself as matron to the fever-ward while it is so full. They have accepted me; and I am going this evening."

"Oh, Ruth! I feared this; I saw your look this morning as we spoke of this terrible illness."

"Why do you say 'fear,' Mr. Benson? You yourself have been with John Harrison, and old Betty, and many others, I dare say, of whom we have not heard."

"But this is so different! in such poisoned air! among such malignant cases! Have you thought and weighed it enough, Ruth?"

She was quite still for a moment, but her eyes grew full of tears. At last she said, very softly, with a kind of still solemnity:

"Yes! I have thought, and I have weighed. But through the very midst of all my fears and thoughts I have felt that I must go."

The remembrance of Leonard was present in both their minds; but for a few moments longer they neither of them spoke. Then Ruth said:

"I believe I have no fear. That is a great preservative, they say. At any rate, if I have a little natural shrinking, it is quite gone when I remember that I am in God's hands! Oh, Mr. Benson," continued she, breaking out into the irrepressible tears—"Leonard, Leonard!"

And now it was his turn to speak out the brave words of faith.

"Poor, poor mother!" said he. "But be of good heart. He, too, is in God's hands. Think what a flash of time only will separate you from him, if you should die in this work!"

"But he—but he—it will be long to him, Mr. Benson! He will be alone!"

"No, Ruth, he will not. God and all good men will watch over him. But if you cannot still this agony of fear as to what will become of him, you ought not to go. Such tremulous passion will predispose you to take the fever."

"I will not be afraid," she replied, lifting up her face, over which a bright light shone, as of God's

radiance. "I am not afraid for myself. I will not be so for my darling."

After a little pause, they began to arrange the manner of her going, and to speak about the length of time that she might be absent on her temporary duties. In talking of her return, they assumed it to be certain, although the exact time when was to them unknown, and would be dependent entirely on the duration of the fever; but not the less, in their secret hearts, did they feel where alone the issue lay. Ruth was to communicate with Leonard and Miss Faith through Mr. Benson alone, who insisted on his determination to go every evening to the hospital to learn the proceedings of the day, and the state of Ruth's health.

"It is not alone on your account, my dear! There may be many sick people of whom, if I can give no other comfort, I can take intelligence to their friends."

All was settled with grave composure; yet still Ruth lingered, as if nerving herself up for some

effort. At length she said, with a faint smile upon her pale face:

"I believe I am a great coward. I stand here talking because I dread to tell Leonard."

"You must not think of it," exclaimed he.
"Leave it to me. It is sure to unnerve you."

"I must think of it. I shall have self-control enough in a minute to do it calmly—to speak hopefully. For only think," continued she, smiling through the tears that would gather in her eyes, "what a comfort the remembrance of the last few words may be to the poor fellow, if——" The words were choked, but she smiled bravely on.
"No!" said she, "that must be done; but perhaps you will spare me one thing—will you tell Aunt Faith? I suppose I am very weak, but, knowing that I must go, and not knowing what may be the end, I feel as if I could not bear to resist her entreaties just at last. Will you tell her, sir, while I go to Leonard?"

Silently he consented, and the two rose up and

came forth, calm and serene. And calmly and gently did Ruth tell her boy of her purpose; not daring even to use any unaccustomed tenderness of voice or gesture, lest, by so doing, she should alarm him unnecessarily as to the result. She spoke hopefully, and bade him be of good courage; and he caught her bravery, though his, poor boy! had root rather in his ignorance of the actual imminent danger than in her deep faith,

When he had gone down, Ruth began to arrange her dress. When she came down-stairs she went into the old familiar garden and gathered a nosegay of the last lingering autumn flowers—a few roses and the like.

Mr. Benson had tutored his sister well; and although Miss Faith's face was swollen with crying, she spoke with almost exaggerated cheerfulness to Ruth. Indeed, as they all stood at the front door, making-believe to have careless nothings to say, just as at an ordinary leave-taking, you would

not have guessed the strained chords of feeling there were in each heart. They lingered on, the last rays of the setting sun falling on the group. Ruth once or twice had roused herself to the pitch of saying "Good-by," but when her eye fell on Leonard she was forced to hide the quivering of her lips, and conceal her trembling mouth amid the bunch of roses.

"They won't let you have your flowers, I'm afraid," said Miss Benson. "Doctors so often object to the smell."

"No; perhaps not," said Ruth, hurriedly. "I did not think of it. I will only keep this one rose. Here, Leonard, darling!" She gave the rest to him. It was her farewell; for having now no veil to hide her emotion, she summoned all her bravery for one parting smile, and, smiling, turned away. But she gave one look back from the street, just from the last point at which the door could be seen, and catching a glimpse of Leonard standing fore-

most on the step, she ran back, and he met her half-way, and mother and child spoke never a word in that close embrace.

"Now, Leonard," said Miss Faith, "be a brave boy. I feel sure she will come back to us before very long."

But she was very near crying herself; and she would have given way, I believe, if she had not found the wholesome outlet of scolding Sally, for expressing just the same opinion respecting Ruth's proceedings as she herself had done not two hours before. Taking what her brother had said to her as a text, she delivered such a lecture to Sally on want of faith that she was astonished at herself, and so much affected by what she had said that she had to shut the door of communication between the kitchen and the parlour pretty hastily, in order to prevent Sally's threatened reply from weakening her belief in the righteousness of what Ruth had done. Her words had gone beyond her conviction.

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Evening after evening Mr. Benson went forth to gain news of Ruth; and night after night he returned with good tidings. The fever, it is true, raged; but no plague came nigh her. He said her face was ever calm and bright, except when clouded by sorrow as she gave the accounts of the deaths which occurred in spite of every care. He said that he had never seen her face so fair and gentle as it was now, when she was living in the midst of disease and woe.

One evening Leonard (for they had grown bolder as to the infection) accompanied him to the street on which the hospital abutted. Mr. Benson left him there, and told him to return home; but the boy lingered, attracted by the crowd that had gathered, and were gazing up intently towards the lighted windows of the hospital. There was nothing beyond that to be seen; but the greater part of these poor people had friends or relations in that palace of Death.

Leonard stood and listened. At first their talk

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consisted of vague and exaggerated accounts (if such could be exaggerated) of the horrors of the fever. Then they spoke of Ruth—of his mother; and Leonard held his breath to hear.

“ They say she has been a great sinner, and that this is her penance,” quoth one. And as Leonard gasped, before rushing forward to give the speaker straight the lie, an old man spoke:

“ Such a one as her has never been a great sinner; nor does she do her work as a penance, but for the love of God, and of the blessed Jesus. She will be in the light of God’s countenance when you and I will be standing afar off. I tell you, man, when my poor wench died, as no one would come near, her head lay at that hour on this woman’s sweet breast. I could fell you,” the old man went on, lifting his shaking arm, “ for calling that woman a great sinner. The blessing of them who were ready to perish is upon her.”

Immediately there arose a clamour of tongues, each with some tale of his mother’s gentle doings,

till Leonard grew dizzy with the beatings of his glad, proud heart. Few were aware how much Ruth had done ; she never spoke of it, shrinking with sweet shyness from over-much allusion to her own work at all times. Her left hand truly knew not what her right hand did ; and Leonard was overwhelmed now to hear of the love and the reverence with which the poor and outcast had surrounded her. It was irrepressible. He stepped forward with a proud bearing, and touching the old man's arm, who had first spoken, Leonard tried to speak ; but for an instant he could not, his heart was too full: tears came before words, but at length he managed to say:

“ Sir, I am her son !”

“ Thou ! thou her bairn ! God bless you, lad,” said an old woman, pushing through the crowd. “ It was but last night she kept my child quiet with singing psalms the night through. Low and sweet, low and sweet, they tell me—till many poor things were hushed, though they were out of their

minds, and had not heard psalms this many a year. God in heaven bless you, lad!"

Many other wild, woe-begone creatures pressed forward with blessings on Ruth's son, while he could only repeat:

"She is my mother."

From that day forward Leonard walked erect in the streets of Eccleston, where "many arose and called her blessed."

After some weeks the virulence of the fever abated; and the general panic subsided—indeed, a kind of fool-hardiness succeeded. To be sure, in some instances the panic still held possession of individuals to an exaggerated extent. But the number of patients in the hospital was rapidly diminishing, and, for money, those were to be found who could supply Ruth's place. But to her it was owing that the overwrought fear of the town was subdued; it was she who had gone voluntarily, and, with no thought of greed or gain, right into the very jaws of the fierce disease. She bade the inmates of the

hospital farewell, and after carefully submitting herself to the purification recommended by Mr. Davis, the principal surgeon of the place, who had always attended Leonard, she returned to Mr. Benson's just at gloaming time.

They each vied with the other in the tenderest cares. They hastened tea; they wheeled the sofa to the fire; they made her lie down; and to all she submitted with the docility of a child; and when the candles came, even Mr. Benson's anxious eye could see no change in her looks, but that she seemed a little paler. The eyes were as full of spiritual light, the gently parted lips as rosy, and the smile, if more rare, yet as sweet as ever.

CHAPTER X.

THE next morning, Miss Benson would insist upon making Ruth lie down on the sofa. Ruth longed to do many things; to be much more active; but she submitted, when she found that it would gratify Miss Faith if she remained as quiet as if she were really an invalid.

Leonard sat by her holding her hand. Every now and then he looked up from his book, as if to make sure that she indeed was restored to him. He had brought her down the flowers which she had given him the day of her departure, and which he had kept in water as long as they had any greenness or fragrance, and then had carefully dried and put by. She too, smiling, had produced the one rose which

she had carried away to the hospital. Never had the bond between her and her boy been drawn so firm and strong.

Many visitors came this day to the quiet Chapel-house. First of all Mrs. Farquhar appeared. She looked very different from the Jemima Bradshaw of three years ago. Happiness had called out beauty; the colouring of her face was lovely, and vivid as that of an autumn day; her berry-red lips scarce closed over the short white teeth for her smiles; and her large dark eyes glowed and sparkled with daily happiness. They were softened by a mist of tears as she looked upon Ruth.

“Lie still! Don’t move! You must be content to-day to be waited upon, and nursed! I have just seen Miss Benson in the lobby, and had charge upon charge not to fatigue you. Oh, Ruth! how we all love you, now we have you back again! Do you know, I taught Rosa to say her prayers as soon as ever you were gone to that horrid place, just on purpose that her little innocent lips might pray for

you—I wish you could hear her say it—‘Please, dear God, keep Ruth safe.’ Oh, Leonard! are not you proud of your mother?”

Leonard said “Yes,” rather shortly, as if he were annoyed that any one else should know, or even have a right to imagine, how proud he was. Jemima went on:

“Now, Ruth! I have got a plan for you. Walter and I have partly made it; and partly it’s papa’s doing. Yes, dear! papa has been quite anxious to show his respect for you. We all want you to go to the dear Eagle’s Crag for this next month, and get strong, and have some change in that fine air at Abermouth. I am going to take little Rosa there. Papa has lent it to us. And the weather is often very beautiful in November.”

“Thank you very much. It is very tempting; for I have been almost longing for some such change. I cannot tell all at once whether I can go; but I will see about it, if you will let me leave it open a little.”

“ Oh ! as long as you like, so that you will but go at last. And, Master Leonard ! you are to come too. Now, I know I have you on my side.”

Ruth thought of the place. Her only reluctance arose from the remembrance of that one interview on the sands. That walk she could never go again ; but how much remained ! How much that would be a charming balm and refreshment to her !

“ What happy evenings we shall have together ! Do you know, I think Mary and Elizabeth may perhaps come.”

A bright gleam of sunshine came into the room. “ Look ! how bright and propitious for our plans. Dear Ruth, it seems like an omen for the future !”

Almost while she spoke, Miss Benson entered, bringing with her Mr. Grey, the rector of Eccleston. He was an elderly man, short and stoutly-built, with something very formal in his manner ; but any one might feel sure of his steady benevolence who noticed the expression of his face, and especially of the kindly black eyes that gleamed beneath

his grey and shaggy eyebrows. Ruth had seen him at the hospital once or twice, and Mrs. Farquhar had met him pretty frequently in general society.

"Go and tell your uncle," said Miss Benson to Leonard.

"Stop, my boy! I have just met Mr. Benson in the street, and my errand now is to your mother. I should like you to remain and hear what it is ; and I am sure that my business will give these ladies"—bowing to Miss Benson and Jemima—"so much pleasure, that I need not apologise for entering upon it in their presence."

He pulled out his double eye-glass, saying, with a grave smile :

"You ran away from us yesterday so quietly and cunningly, Mrs. Denbigh, that you were, perhaps, not aware that the Board was sitting at that very time, and trying to form a vote sufficiently expressive of our gratitude to you. As Chairman, they

requested me to present you with this letter, which I shall have the pleasure of reading."

With all due emphasis he read aloud a formal letter from the Secretary to the Infirmary, conveying a vote of thanks to Ruth.

The good rector did not spare her one word, from date to signature ; and then, folding the letter up, he gave it to Leonard, saying :

" There, sir ! when you are an old man, you may read that testimony to your mother's noble conduct with pride and pleasure. For, indeed," continued he, turning to Jemima, " no words can express the relief it was to us. I speak of the gentlemen composing the Board of the Infirmary. When Mrs. Denbigh came forward, the panic was at its height, and the alarm of course aggravated the disorder. The poor creatures died rapidly ; there was hardly time to remove the dead bodies before others were brought in to occupy the beds, so little help was to be procured on account of the universal terror ; and

the morning when Mrs. Denbigh offered us her services, we seemed at the very worst. I shall never forget the sensation of relief in my mind when she told us what she proposed to do ; but we thought it right to warn her to the full extent——

“Nay, madam,” said he, catching a glimpse of Ruth’s changing colour, “I will spare you any more praises. I will only say, if I can be a friend to you, or a friend to your child, you may command my poor powers to the utmost.”

He got up, and bowing formally, he took his leave. Jemima came and kissed Ruth. Leonard went up-stairs to put the precious letter away. Miss Benson sat crying heartily in a corner of the room. Ruth went to her, and threw her arms round her neck, and said :

“I could not tell him just then. I durst not speak for fear of breaking down ; but if I have done right, it was all owing to you and Mr. Benson. Oh ! I wish I had said how the thought first came into my head from seeing the things Mr. Benson

has done so quietly ever since the fever first came amongst us. I could not speak ; and it seemed as if I was taking those praises to myself, when all the time I was feeling how little I deserved them—how it was all owing to you.”

“ Under God, Ruth,” said Miss Benson, speaking through her tears.

“ Oh ! I think there is nothing humbles one so much as undue praise. While he was reading that letter, I could not help feeling how many things I have done wrong ! Could he know of—of what I have been ?” asked she, dropping her voice very low.

“ Yes !” said Jemima, “ he knew—everybody in Eccleston did know—but the remembrance of those days is swept away. Miss Benson,” she continued, for she was anxious to turn the subject, “ you must be on my side, and persuade Ruth to come to Abermouth for a few weeks. I want her and Leonard both to come.”

“ I’m afraid my brother will think that Leonard

is missing his lessons sadly. Just of late we could not wonder that the poor child's heart was so full; but he must make haste, and get on all the more for his idleness." Miss Benson piqued herself on being a disciplinarian.

"Oh, as for lessons, Walter is so very anxious that you should give way to his superior wisdom, Ruth, and let Leonard go to school. He will send him to any school you fix upon, according to the mode of life you plan for him."

"I have no plan," said Ruth. "I have no means of planning. All I can do is to try and make him ready for anything."

"Well," said Jemima, "we must talk it over at Abermouth; for I am sure you won't refuse to come, dearest, dear Ruth! Think of the quiet, sunny days, and the still evenings, that we shall have together, with little Rosa to tumble about among the fallen leaves; and there's Leonard to have his first sight of the sea."

"I do think of it," said Ruth, smiling at the happy picture Jemima drew. And both smiling

at the hopeful prospect before them, they parted—never to meet again in life.

No sooner had Mrs. Farquhar gone than Sally burst in.

“Oh! dear, dear!” said she, looking around her. “If I had but known that the rector was coming to call, I’d ha’ put on the best covers, and the Sunday tablecloth! You’re well enough,” continued she, surveying Ruth from head to foot; “you’re always trim and dainty in your gowns, though I reckon they cost but tuppence a yard, and you’ve a face to set ’em off; but as for you” (as she turned to Miss Benson), “I think you might ha’ had something better on than that old stuff, if it had only been to do credit to a parishioner like me, whom he has known ever sin’ my father was his clerk.”

“You forget, Sally, I had been making jelly all the morning. How could I tell it was Mr. Grey when there was a knock at the door?” Miss Benson replied.

“You might ha’ letten me do the jelly; I’se warrant I could ha’ pleased Ruth as well as you.

If I had but known he was coming, I'd ha' slipped round the corner and bought ye a neck-ribbon, or summut to lighten ye up. I'se loth he should think I'm living with Dissenters, that don't know how to keep themselves trig and smart."

"Never mind, Sally; he never thought of me. What he came for, was to see Ruth; and, as you say, she's always neat and dainty."

"Well! I reckon it cannot be helped now; but if I buy ye a ribbon, will you promise to wear it when church-folks come? for I cannot abide the way they have of scoffing at the Dissenters about their dress."

"Very well! we'll make that bargain," said Miss Benson; "and now, Ruth, I'll go and fetch you a cup of warm jelly."

"Oh! indeed, Aunt Faith," said Ruth, "I am very sorry to balk you; but, if you're going to treat me as an invalid, I am afraid I shall rebel."

But when she found that Aunt Faith's heart was set upon it, she submitted very graciously; only dimpling up a little, as she found that she must

consent to lie on the sofa, and be fed, when, in truth, she felt full of health, with a luxurious sensation of languor stealing over her now and then, just enough to make it very pleasant to think of the salt breezes, and the sea beauty which awaited her at Abermouth.

Mr. Davis called in the afternoon, and his visit was also to Ruth. Mr. and Miss Benson were sitting with her in the parlour, and watching her with contented love, as she employed herself in household sewing, and hopefully spoke about the Abermouth plan.

“Well! so you had our worthy rector here to-day; I am come on something of the same kind of errand; only I shall spare you the reading of my letter, which, I’ll answer for it, he did not. Please to take notice,” said he, putting down a sealed letter, “that I have delivered you a vote of thanks from my medical brothers; and open and read it at your leisure; only rest now, for I want to have a little talk with you on my own behoof. I want to ask you a favour, Mrs. Denbigh.”

"A favour!" exclaimed Ruth; "what can I do for you? I think I may say I will do it, without hearing what it is."

"Then you're a very imprudent woman," replied he; "however, I'll take you at your word. I want you to give me your boy."

"Leonard!"

"Ay! there it is, you see, Mr. Benson. One minute she is as ready as can be, and the next, she looks at me as if I was an ogre!"

"Perhaps we don't understand what you mean," said Mr. Benson.

"The thing is this. You know I've no children; and I can't say I've ever fretted over it much; but my wife has; and whether it is that she has infected me, or that I grieve over my good practice going to a stranger, when I ought to have had a son to take it after me, I don't know; but, of late, I've got to look with covetous eyes on all healthy boys, and at last I've settled down my wishes on this Leonard of yours, Mrs. Denbigh."

Ruth could not speak; for, even yet, she did not understand what he meant. He went on:

"Now, how old is the lad?" He asked Ruth, but Miss Benson replied:

"He'll be twelve next February."

"Umph! only twelve! He's tall and old looking for his age. You look young enough, it is true." He said this last sentence as if to himself, but seeing Ruth crimson up, he abruptly changed his tone.

"Twelve, is he! Well, I take him from now. I don't mean that I really take him away from you," said he, softening all at once, and becoming grave and considerate. "His being your son—the son of one whom I have seen—as I have seen you, Mrs. Denbigh (out and out the best nurse I ever met with, Miss Benson; and good nurses are things we doctors know how to value)—his being your son is his great recommendation to me; not but what the lad himself is a noble boy. I shall be glad to leave him with you as long and as much as we can; he could not be tied to your apron-string all his life,

you know. Only I provide for his education, subject to your consent and good pleasure, and he is bound apprentice to me. I, his guardian, bind him to myself, the first surgeon in Eccleston, be the other who he may; and in process of time he becomes partner, and some day or other succeeds me. Now, Mrs. Denbigh, what have you got to say against this plan? My wife is just as full of it as me. Come! begin with your objections. You're not a woman if you have not a whole bag-full of them ready to turn out against any reasonable proposal."

"I don't know," faltered Ruth. "It is so sudden——"

"It is very, very kind of you, Mr. Davis," said Miss Benson, a little scandalised at Ruth's non-expression of gratitude.

"Pooh! pooh! I'll answer for it, in the long run, I am taking good care of my own interests. Come, Mrs. Denbigh, is it a bargain?"

Now Mr. Benson spoke.

"Mr. Davis, it is rather sudden, as she says. As

far as I can see, it is the best as well as the kindest proposal that could have been made; but I think we must give her a little time to think about it."

"Well, twenty-four hours! Will that do?"

Ruth lifted up her head. "Mr. Davis, I am not ungrateful because I can't thank you" (she was crying while she spoke); "let me have a fortnight to consider about it. In a fortnight I will make up my mind. Oh, how good you all are!"

"Very well. Then this day fortnight—Thursday the 28th—you will let me know your decision. Mind! if it's against me, I sha'n't consider it a decision, for I'm determined to carry my point. I'm not going to make Mrs. Denbigh blush, Mr. Benson, by telling you, in her presence, of all I have observed about her this last three weeks, that has made me sure of the good qualities I shall find in this boy of hers. I was watching her when she little thought it. Do you remember that night when Hector O'Brien was so furiously delirious, Mrs. Denbigh?"

Ruth went very white at the remembrance.

"Why now, look there! how pale she is at the very thought of it. And yet, I assure you, she was the one to go up and take the piece of glass from him which he had broken out of the window for the sole purpose of cutting his throat, or the throat of any one else, for that matter. I wish we had some others as brave as she is."

"I thought the great panic was passed away!" said Mr. Benson.

"Ay! the general feeling of alarm is much weaker; but, here and there, there are as great fools as ever. Why, when I leave here, I am going to see our precious member, Mr. Donne——"

"Mr. Donne?" said Ruth.

"Mr. Donne, who lies ill at the Queen's—came last week, with the intention of canvassing, but was too much alarmed by what he heard of the fever to set to work; and, in spite of all his precautions, he has taken it; and you should see the terror they are in at the hotel; landlord, landlady, waiters,

servants—all ; there's not a creature will go near him, if they can help it ; and there's only his groom—a lad he saved from drowning, I'm told—to do anything for him. I must get him a proper nurse, somehow or somewhere, for all my being a Cranworth-man. Ah, Mr. Benson ! you don't know the temptations we medical men have. Think, if I allowed your member to die now, as he might very well, if he had no nurse—how famously Mr. Cranworth would walk over the course !—Where's Mrs. Denbigh gone to ? I hope I've not frightened her away by reminding her of Hector O'Brien, and that awful night, when I do assure you she behaved like a heroine !”

As Mr. Benson was showing Mr. Davis out, Ruth opened the study-door, and said, in a very calm, low voice :

“Mr. Benson ! will you allow me to speak to Mr. Davis alone ?”

Mr. Benson immediately consented, thinking that, in all probability, she wished to ask some

further questions about Leonard; but as Mr. Davis came into the room, and shut the door, he was struck by her pale, stern face of determination, and awaited her speaking first.

"Mr. Davis! I must go and nurse Mr. Bellingham," said she at last, clenching her hands tight together, but no other part of her body moving from its intense stillness.

"Mr. Bellingham?" asked he, astonished at the name.

"Mr. Donne, I mean," said she, hurriedly "His name was Bellingham."

"Oh! I remember hearing he had changed his name for some property. But you must not think of any more such work just now. You are not fit for it. You are looking as white as ashes."

"I must go," she repeated.

"Nonsense! Here's a man who can pay for the care of the first hospital nurses in London—and I doubt if his life is worth the risk of one of theirs even, much more of yours."

"We have no right to weigh human lives against each other."

"No! I know we have not. But it's a way we doctors are apt to get into; and, at any rate, it's ridiculous of you to think of such a thing. Just listen to reason."

"I can't! I can't!" cried she, with sharp pain in her voice. "You must let me go, dear Mr. Davis!" said she, now speaking with soft entreaty.

"No!" said he, shaking his head authoritatively. "I'll do no such thing."

"Listen!" said she, dropping her voice, and going all over the deepest scarlet; "he is Leonard's father! Now! you will let me go!"

Mr. Davis was indeed staggered by what she said, and for a moment he did not speak. So she went on:

"You will not tell! You must not tell! No one knows, not even Mr. Benson, who it was. And now—it might do him so much harm to have it known. You will not tell!"

"No! I will not tell," replied he. "But, Mrs. Denhigh, you must answer me this one question, which I ask you in all true respect, but which I must ask, in order to guide both myself and you aright—Of course I knew Leonard was illegitimate—in fact, I will give you secret for secret: it was being so myself that first made me sympathise with him, and desire to adopt him. I knew that much of your history; but tell me, do you now care for this man? Answer me truly—do you love him?"

For a moment or two she did not speak; her head was bent down; then she raised it up, and looked with clear and honest eyes into his face.

"I have been thinking—but I do not know—I cannot tell—I don't think I should love him, if he were well and happy—but you said he was ill—and alone—how can I help caring for him?—how can I help caring for him?" repeated she, covering her face with her hands, and the quick hot tears stealing through her fingers. "He is Leonard's father," continued she, looking up at Mr. Davis suddenly.

"He need not know—he shall not—that I have ever been near him. If he is like the others, he must be delirious—I will leave him before he comes to himself—but now let me go—I must go."

"I wish my tongue had been bitten out before I had named him to you. He would do well enough without you; and, I dare say, if he recognises you, he will only be annoyed."

"It is very likely!" said Ruth, heavily.

"Annoyed,—why! he may curse you for your unasked-for care of him. I have heard my poor mother—and she was as pretty and delicate a creature as you are—cursed for showing tenderness when it was not wanted. Now, be persuaded by an old man like me, who has seen enough of life to make his heart ache—leave this fine gentleman to his fate. I'll promise you to get him as good a nurse as can be had for money."

"No!" said Ruth, with dull persistency—as if she had not attended to his dissuasions; "I must go. I will leave him before he recognises me."

"Why, then," said the old surgeon, "if you're so bent upon it, I suppose I must let you. It is but what my mother would have done—poor, heart-broken thing! However, come along, and let us make the best of it. It saves me a deal of trouble, I know; for, if I have you for a right hand, I need not worry myself continually with wondering how he is taken care of. Go! get your bonnet, you tender-hearted fool of a woman! Let us get you out of the house without any more scenes or explanations; I'll make all straight with the Bensons."

"You will not tell my secret, Mr. Davis," she said, abruptly.

"No! not I! Does the woman think I had never to keep a secret of the kind before? I only hope he'll lose his election, and never come near the place again. After all," continued he, sighing, "I suppose it is but human nature!" He began recalling the circumstances of his own early life, and dreamily picturing scenes in the grey dying embers of the

fire; and he was almost startled when she stood before him, ready equipped, grave, pale, and quiet.

"Come along!" said he. "If you're to do any good at all, it must be in these next three days. After that, I'll ensure his life for this bout; and mind! I shall send you home then; for he might know you, and I'll have no excitement to throw him back again, and no sobbing and crying from you. But now every moment your care is precious to him. I shall tell my own story to the Bensons, as soon as I have installed you."

Mr. Donne lay in the best room of the Queen's Hotel—no one with him but his faithful, ignorant servant, who was as much afraid of the fever as any one else could be, but who, nevertheless, would not leave his master—his master who had saved his life as a child, and afterwards put him in the stables at Bellingham Hall, where he learnt all that he knew. He stood in a farther corner of the room, watching

his delirious master with affrighted eyes, not daring to come near him, nor yet willing to leave him.

“ Oh! if that doctor would but come! He'll kill himself or me—and them stupid servants won't stir a step over the threshold; how shall I get over the night? Blessings on him—here's the old doctor back again! I hear him creaking and scolding up the stairs!”

The door opened, and Mr. Davis entered, followed by Ruth.

“ Here's the nurse, my good man—such a nurse as there is not in the three counties. Now, all you'll have to do is to mind what she says.”

“ Oh, sir! he's mortal bad! won't you stay with us through the night, sir?”

“ Look there!” whispered Mr. Davis to the man, “ see how she knows how to manage him! why, I could not do it better myself!”

She had gone up to the wild, raging figure, and with soft authority had made him lie down: and then, placing a basin of cold water by the bed-

side, she had dipped in it her pretty hands, and was laying their cool dampness on his hot brow, speaking in a low soothing voice all the time, in a way that acted like a charm in hushing his mad talk.

“But I will stay!” said the doctor, after he had examined his patient; “as much on her account as his! and partly to quieten the fears of this poor, faithful fellow.”

CHAPTER XI.

THE third night after this was to be the crisis—the turning point between Life and Death. Mr. Davis came again to pass it by the bedside of the sufferer. Ruth was there, constant and still, intent upon watching the symptoms, and acting according to them, in obedience to Mr. Davis's directions. She had never left the room. Every sense had been strained in watching—every power of thought or judgment had been kept on the full stretch. Now that Mr. Davis came and took her place, and that the room was quiet for the night, she became oppressed with heaviness, which yet did not tend to sleep. She could not remember the present time, or where she was. All times of her

earliest youth—the days of her childhood—were in her memory with a minuteness and fulness of detail which was miserable ; for all along she felt that she had no real grasp on the scenes that were passing through her mind—that, somehow, they were long gone by, and gone by for ever—and yet she could not remember who she was now, nor where she was, and whether she had now any interests in life to take the place of those which she was conscious had passed away, although their remembrance filled her mind with painful acuteness. Her head lay on her arms, and they rested on the table. Every now and then she opened her eyes, and saw the large room, handsomely furnished with articles that were each one incongruous with the other, as if bought at sales. She saw the flickering night-light—she heard the ticking of the watch, and the two breathings, each going on at a separate rate—one hurried, abruptly stopping, and then panting violently, as if to make up for lost time ; and the other slow, steady and regular, as if the breather

was asleep ; but this supposition was contradicted by an occasional repressed sound of yawning. The sky through the uncurtained window looked dark and black—would this night never have an end ? Had the sun gone down for ever, and would the world at last awaken to a general sense of everlasting night ?

Then she felt as if she ought to get up, and go and see how the troubled sleeper in yonder bed was struggling through his illness ; but she could not remember who the sleeper was, and she shrunk from seeing some phantom-face on the pillow, such as now began to haunt the dark corners of the room, and look at her, jibbering and mowing as they looked. So she covered her face again, and sank into a whirling stupor of sense and feeling. By-and-by she heard her fellow-watcher stirring, and a dull wonder stole over her as to what he was doing ; but the heavy languor pressed her down, and kept her still. At last she heard the words, "Come here," and listlessly obeyed the command.

She had to steady herself in the rocking chamber before she could walk to the bed by which Mr. Davis stood; but the effort to do so roused her, and, although conscious of an oppressive headache, she viewed with sudden and clear vision all the circumstances of her present position. Mr. Davis was near the head of the bed, holding the night-lamp high, and shading it with his hand, that it might not disturb the sick person, who lay with his face towards them, in feeble exhaustion, but with every sign that the violence of the fever had left him. It so happened that the rays of the lamp fell bright and full upon Ruth's countenance, as she stood with her crimson lips parted with the hurrying breath, and the fever-flush brilliant on her cheeks. Her eyes were wide open, and their pupils distended. She looked on the invalid in silence, and hardly understood why Mr. Davis had summoned her there.

"Don't you see the change? He is better!—the crisis is past!"

But she did not speak ; her looks were riveted on his softly-unclosing eyes, which met hers as they opened languidly. She could not stir or speak. She was held fast by that gaze of his, in which a faint recognition dawned, and grew to strength.

He murmured some words. They strained their sense to hear. He repeated them even lower than before ; but this time they caught what he was saying.

“ Where are the water-lilies ? Where are the lilies in her hair ? ”

Mr. Davis drew Ruth away.

“ He is still rambling,” said he, “ But the fever has left him.”

The grey dawn was now filling the room with its cold light ; was it that made Ruth’s cheek so deadly pale ? Could that call out the wild entreaty of her look, as if imploring help against some cruel foe that held her fast, and was wrestling with her

Spirit of Life ? She held Mr. Davis's arm. If she had let it go, she would have fallen.

"Take me home," she said, and fainted dead away.

Mr. Davis carried her out of the chamber, and sent the groom to keep watch by his master. He ordered a fly to convey her to Mr. Benson's, and lifted her in when it came, for she was still half unconscious. It was he who carried her up-stairs to her room ; where Miss Benson and Sally undressed and laid her in her bed.

He awaited their proceedings in Mr. Benson's study. When Mr. Benson came in, Mr. Davis said :

"Don't blame me. Don't add to my self-reproach. I have killed her. I was a cruel fool to let her go. Don't speak to me."

"It may not be so bad," said Mr. Benson, himself needing comfort in that shock. "She may recover. She surely will recover. I believe she will."

"No, no! she won't. But by —— she shall, if I can save her." Mr. Davis looked defiantly at Mr. Benson, as if he were Fate. "I tell you she shall recover, or else I am a murderer. What business had I to take her to nurse him——"

He was cut short by Sally's entrance, and announcement that Ruth was now prepared to see him.

From that time forward Mr. Davis devoted all his leisure, his skill, his energy to save her. He called on the rival surgeon to beg him to undertake the management of Mr. Donne's recovery, saying, with his usual self-mockery, "I could not answer it to Mr. Cranworth if I had brought his opponent round, you know, when I had had such a fine opportunity in my power. Now, with your patients, and general Radical interest, it will be rather a feather in your cap; for he may want a good deal of care yet, though he is getting on famously—so rapidly, in fact, that it's a strong temptation to me to throw him back—a relapse, you know."

The other surgeon bowed gravely, apparently taking Mr. Davis in earnest, but certainly very glad of the job thus opportunely thrown in his way. In spite of Mr. Davis's real and deep anxiety about Ruth, he could not help chuckling over his rival's literal interpretation of all he had said.

"To be sure, what fools men are! I don't know why one should watch and strive to keep them in the world. I have given this fellow something to talk about confidentially to all his patients; I wonder how much stronger a dose the man would have swallowed! I must begin to take care of my practice for that lad yonder. Well-a-day! well-a-day! What was this sick fine gentleman sent here for, that she should run a chance of her life for him? or why was he sent into the world at all, for that matter?"

Indeed, however much Mr. Davis might labour with all his professional skill—however much they might all watch—and pray—and weep—it was but

too evident that Ruth "home must go, and take her wages." Poor, poor Ruth!

It might be that, utterly exhausted by watching and nursing, first in the hospital, and then by the bedside of her former lover, the power of her constitution was worn out; or, it might be, her gentle, pliant sweetness, but she displayed no outrage or discord even in her delirium. There she lay in the attic-room in which her baby had been born, her watch over him kept, her confession to him made; and now she was stretched on the bed in utter helplessness, softly gazing at vacancy with her open, unconscious eyes, from which all the depth of their meaning had fled, and all they told was of a sweet, child-like insanity within. The watchers could not touch her with their sympathy, or come near her in her dim world;—so, mutely, but looking at each other from time to time with tearful eyes, they took a poor comfort from the one evident fact that, though lost and gone astray, she was happy and at peace. They had

never heard her sing; indeed the simple art which her mother had taught her, had died, with her early joyousness, at that dear mother's death. But now she sang continually, very soft and low. She went from one old childish ditty to another without let or pause, keeping a strange sort of time with her pretty fingers, as they closed and unclosed themselves upon the counterpane. She never looked at any one with the slightest glimpse of memory or intelligence in her face; no, not even at Leonard.

Her strength faded day by day; but she knew it not. Her sweet lips were parted to sing, even after the breath and the power to do so had left her, and her fingers fell idly on the bed. Two days she lingered thus—all but gone from them, and yet still there.

They stood around her bedside, not speaking, or sighing, or moaning; they were too much awed by the exquisite peacefulness of her look for that. Suddenly she opened wide her eyes, and gazed intently forwards, as if she saw some happy vision, which called out a lovely, rapturous, breathless smile. They held their very breaths.

"I see the Light coming," said she. "The Light is coming," she said. And, raising herself slowly, she stretched out her arms, and then fell back, very still for evermore.

They did not speak. Mr. Davis was the first to utter a word.

"It is over!" said he. "She is dead!"

Outrang through the room the cry of Leonard:

"Mother! mother! mother! You have not left me alone! You will not leave me alone! You are not dead! Mother! Mother!"

They had pent in his agony of apprehension till then, that no wail of her child might disturb her ineffable calm. But now there was a cry heard through the house, of one refusing to be comforted:

"Mother! Mother!"

But Ruth lay dead.

CHAPTER XII.

A STUPOR of grief succeeded to Leonard's passionate cries. He became so much depressed, physically as well as mentally, before the end of the day, that Mr. Davis was seriously alarmed for the consequences. He hailed with gladness a proposal made by the Farquhars, that the boy should be removed to their house, and placed under the fond care of his mother's friend, who sent her own child to Abermouth the better to devote herself to Leonard.

When they told him of this arrangement, he at first refused to go and leave *her*; but when Mr. Benson said:

“ *She* would have wished it, Leonard! Do it

for her sake!" he went away very quietly; not speaking a word, after Mr. Benson had made the voluntary promise that he should see her once again. He neither spoke nor cried for many hours; and all Jemima's delicate wiles were called forth, before his heavy heart could find the relief of tears. And then he was so weak, and his pulse so low, that all who loved him feared for his life.

Anxiety about him made a sad distraction from the sorrow for the dead. The three old people who now formed the household in the Chapel-house, went about slowly and dreamily, each with a dull wonder at their hearts why they, the infirm and worn-out, were left, while she was taken in her lovely prime.

The third day after Ruth's death, a gentleman came to the door and asked to speak to Mr. Benson. He was very much wrapped up in furs and cloaks, and the upper exposed part of his face was sunk and hollow, like that of one but partially recovered from illness. Mr. and Miss Benson were at Mr. Far-

quhar's, gone to see Leonard, and poor old Sally had been having a hearty cry over the kitchen fire before answering the door-knock. Her heart was tenderly inclined just then towards any one who had the aspect of suffering; so, although her master was out, and she was usually chary of admitting strangers, she proposed to Mr. Donne (for it was he) that he should come in and await Mr. Benson's return in the study. He was glad enough to avail himself of her offer; for he was feeble and nervous, and come on a piece of business which he exceedingly disliked, and about which he felt very awkward. The fire was nearly, if not quite, out; nor did Sally's vigorous blows do much good, although she left the room with an assurance that it would soon burn up. He leant against the chimney-piece, thinking over events, and with a sensation of discomfort, both external and internal, growing and gathering upon him. He almost wondered whether the proposal he meant to make with regard to Leonard, could not be better arranged by letter than by

an interview. He became very shivery, and impatient of the state of indecision to which his bodily weakness had reduced him.

Sally opened the door, and came in. "Would you like to walk up-stairs, sir?" asked she, in a trembling voice, for she had learnt who the visitor was from the driver of the fly, who had run up to the house to inquire what was detaining the gentleman that he had brought from the Queen's Hotel; and, knowing that Ruth had caught the fatal fever from her attendance on Mr. Donne, Sally imagined that it was but a piece of sad civility to invite him up-stairs to see the poor dead body, which she had laid out and decked for the grave, with such fond care that she had grown strangely proud of its marble beauty.

Mr. Donne was glad enough of any proposal of a change from the cold and comfortless room where he had thought uneasy, remorseful thoughts. He fancied that a change of place would banish the train of reflection that was troubling him; but the

change he anticipated was to a well-warmed, cheerful sitting-room, with signs of life, and a bright fire therein; and he was on the last flight of stairs,—at the door of the room where Ruth lay—before he understood whither Sally was conducting him. He shrank back for an instant, and then a strange sting of curiosity impelled him on. He stood in the humble low-roofed attic, the window open, and the tops of the distant snow-covered hills filling up the whiteness of the general aspect. He muffled himself up in his cloak, and shuddered, while Sally reverently drew down the sheet, and showed the beautiful, calm, still face, on which the last rapturous smile still lingered, giving an ineffable look of bright serenity. Her arms were crossed over her breast; the wimple-like cap marked the perfect oval of her face, while two braids of the waving auburn hair peeped out of the narrow border, and lay on the delicate cheeks.

He was awed into admiration by the wonderful beauty of that dead woman.

"How beautiful she is!" said he, beneath his breath. "Do all dead people look so peaceful—so happy?"

"Not all," replied Sally, crying. "Few has been as good and as gentle as she was in their lives." She quite shook with her sobbing.

Mr. Donne was disturbed by her distress.

"Come, my good woman! we must all die——" he did not know what to say, and was becoming infected by her sorrow. "I am sure you loved her very much, and were very kind to her in her lifetime; you must take this from me to buy yourself some remembrance of her." He had pulled out a sovereign, and really had a kindly desire to console her, and reward her, in offering it to her.

But she took her apron from her eyes, as soon as she became aware of what he was doing, and, still holding it midway in her hands, she looked at him indignantly, before she burst out:

"And who are you, that think to pay for my kindness to her by money? And I was not kind to you, my darling," said she, passionately addressing

the motionless, serene body—"I was not kind to you. I frabbed you, and plagued you from the first, my lamb! I came and cut off your pretty locks in this very room—I did—and you said never an angry word to me;—no! not then, nor many a time at after, when I was very sharp and cross to you.—No! I never was kind to you, and I dunnot think the world was kind to you, my darling,—but you are gone where the angels are very tender to such as you—you are, my poor wench!" She bent down and kissed the lips, from whose marble, unyielding touch Mr. Donne recoiled, even in thought.

Just then, Mr. Benson entered the room. He had returned home before his sister, and come upstairs in search of Sally, to whom he wanted to speak on some subject relating to the funeral. He bowed in recognition of Mr. Donne, whom he knew as the member for the town, and whose presence impressed him painfully, as his illness had been the proximate cause of Ruth's death. But he tried to check this feeling, as it was no fault of Mr. Donne's.

Sally stole out of the room, to cry at leisure in her kitchen.

"I must apologise for being here," said Mr. Donne. "I was hardly conscious where your servant was leading me to, when she expressed her wish that I should walk up-stairs."

"It is a very common idea in this town, that it is a gratification to be asked to take a last look at the dead," replied Mr. Benson.

"And in this case, I am glad to have seen her once more," said Mr. Donne. "Poor Ruth!"

Mr. Benson glanced up at him at the last word. How did he know her name? To him she had only been Mrs. Denbigh. But Mr. Donne had no idea that he was talking to one unaware of the connexion that had formerly existed between them; and, though he would have preferred carrying on the conversation in a warmer room, yet, as Mr. Benson was still gazing at her with sad, lingering love, he went on :

"I did not recognise her when she came to nurse

me; I believe I was delirious. My servant, who had known her long ago, in Fordham, told me who she was. I cannot tell you how I regret that she should have died in consequence of her love of me."

Mr. Benson looked up at him again, a stern light filling his eyes as he did so. He waited impatiently to hear more, either to quench or confirm his suspicions. If she had not been lying there, very still and calm, he would have forced the words out of Mr. Donne, by some abrupt question. As it was, he listened silently, his heart quick-beating.

"I know that money is but a poor compensation,—is no remedy for this event, or for my youthful folly."

Mr. Benson set his teeth hard together, to keep in words little short of a curse.

"Indeed, I offered her money to almost any amount before;—do me justice, sir," catching the gleam of indignation on Mr. Benson's face: "I offered to marry her, and provide for the boy as

if he had been legitimate. It's of no use recurring to that time," said he, his voice faltering; "what is done cannot be undone. But I came now to say, that I should be glad to leave the boy still under your charge, and that every expense you think it right to incur in his education I will gladly defray;—and place a sum of money in trust for him—say, two thousand pounds—or more: fix what you will. Of course, if you decline retaining him, I must find some one else; but the provision for him shall be the same, for my poor Ruth's sake."

Mr. Benson did not speak. He could not, till he had gathered some peace from looking at the ineffable repose of the Dead.

Then, before he answered, he covered up her face; and in his voice there was the stillness of ice.

"Leonard is not unprovided for. Those that honoured his mother will take care of him. He shall never touch a penny of your money. Every offer of service you have made, I reject in his name,—and in her presence," said he, bending towards

the Dead. "Men may call such actions as yours, youthful follies! There is another name for them with God. Sir! I will follow you down-stairs."

All the way down, Mr. Benson heard Mr. Donne's voice urging and entreating, but the words he could not recognise for the thoughts that filled his brain—the rapid putting together of events that was going on there. And when Mr. Donne turned at the door, to speak again, and repeat his offers of service to Leonard, Mr. Benson made answer, without well knowing whether the answer fitted the question or not:

"I thank God, you have no right, legal or otherwise, over the child. And for her sake, I will spare him the shame of ever hearing your name as his father."

He shut the door in Mr. Donne's face.

"An ill-bred, puritanical old fellow! He may have the boy, I am sure, for aught I care. I have done my duty, and will get out of this abominable place as soon as I can. I wish my last remem-

brance of my beautiful Ruth was not mixed up with all these people."

Mr. Benson was bitterly oppressed with this interview; it disturbed the peace with which he was beginning to contemplate events. His anger ruffled him, although such anger had been just, and such indignation well-deserved; and both had been unconsciously present in his heart for years against the unknown seducer, whom he met face to face by the death-bed of Ruth.

It gave him a shock which he did not recover from for many days. He was nervously afraid lest Mr. Donne should appear at the funeral; and not all the reasons he alleged to himself against this apprehension, put it utterly away from him. Before then, however, he heard casually (for he would allow himself no inquiries) that he had left the town. No! Ruth's funeral passed over in calm and simple solemnity. Her child, her own household, her friend, and Mr. Farquhar, quietly walked after the bier, which was borne by some of the poor

to whom she had been very kind in her lifetime. And many others stood aloof in the little burying-ground, sadly watching that last ceremony.

They slowly dispersed ; Mr. Benson leading Leonard by the hand, and secretly wondering at his self-restraint. Almost as soon as they had let themselves into the Chapel-house, a messenger brought a note from Mrs. Bradshaw, with a pot of quince marmalade, which, she said to Miss Benson, she thought that Leonard might fancy, and if he did, they were to be sure and let her know, as she had plenty more ; or, was there anything else that he would like ? She would gladly make him whatever he fancied.

Poor Leonard ! he lay stretched on the sofa, white and tearless, beyond the power of any such comfort, however kindly offered ; but this was only one of the many homely, simple attentions, which all came round him to offer, from Mr. Grey, the rector, down to the nameless poor who called at the back door to inquire how it fared with *her* child.

Mr. Benson was anxious, according to Dissenting custom, to preach an appropriate funeral sermon. It was the last office he could render to her; it should be done well and carefully. Moreover, it was possible that the circumstances of her life, which were known to all, might be made effective in this manner to work conviction of many truths. Accordingly, he made great preparation of thought and paper; he laboured hard, destroying sheet after sheet—his eyes filling with tears between-whiles, as he remembered some fresh proof of the humility and sweetness of her life. Oh, that he could do her justice! but words seemed hard and inflexible, and refused to fit themselves to his ideas. He sat late on Saturday, writing; he watched through the night till Sunday morning was far advanced. He had never taken such pains with any sermon, and he was only half satisfied with it after all.

Mrs. Farquhar had comforted the bitterness of

Sally's grief by giving her very handsome mourning. At any rate, she felt oddly proud and exulting when she thought of her new black gown ; but when she remembered why she wore it, she scolded herself pretty sharply for her satisfaction, and took to crying afresh with redoubled vigour. She spent the Sunday morning in alternately smoothing down her skirts, and adjusting her broad hemmed collar, or bemoaning the occasion with tearful earnestness. But the sorrow overcame the little quaint vanity of her heart, as she saw troop after troop of humbly-dressed mourners pass by into the old chapel. They were very poor—but each had mounted some rusty piece of crape, or some faded black ribbon. The old came halting and slow—the mothers carried their quiet, awe-struck babes.

And not only these were there—but others—equally unaccustomed to nonconformist worship : Mr. Davis, for instance, to whom Sally acted as chaperone ; for he sat in the minister's pew, as a

stranger; and, as she afterwards said, she had a fellow-feeling with him, being a Church-woman herself, and Dissenters had such awkward ways; however, she had been there before, so she could set him to rights about their fashions.

From the pulpit, Mr. Benson saw one and all—the well-filled Bradshaw pew—all in deep mourning, Mr. Bradshaw conspicuously so (he would have attended the funeral gladly if they would have asked him)—the Farquhars—the many strangers—the still more numerous poor—one or two wild-looking outcasts, who stood afar off, but wept silently and continually. Mr. Benson's heart grew very full.

His voice trembled as he read and prayed. But he steadied it as he opened his sermon—his great, last effort in her honour—the labour that he had prayed God to bless to the hearts of many. For an instant the old man looked on all the upturned faces, listening, with wet eyes, to hear what he could say to

interpret that which was in their hearts, dumb and unshaped, of God's doings as shown in her life. He looked, and, as he gazed, a mist came before him, and he could not see his sermon, nor his hearers, but only Ruth, as she had been—stricken low, and crouching from sight, in the upland field by Llan-dhu—like a woeful, hunted creature. And now her life was over! her struggle ended! Sermon and all was forgotten. He sat down, and hid his face in his hands for a minute or so. Then he arose, pale and serene. He put the sermon away, and opened the Bible, and read the seventh chapter of Revelations, beginning at the ninth verse.

Before it was finished, most of his hearers were in tears. It came home to them as more appropriate than any sermon could have been. Even Sally, though full of anxiety as to what her fellow-Churchman would think of such proceedings, let the sobe come freely as she heard the words:

“ And he said to me, These are they which came

out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

“ Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them.

“ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat.

“ For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters, and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.”

“ He preaches sermons sometimes,” said Sally, nudging Mr. Davis, as they rose from their knees at last. “ I make no doubt there was as grand a sermon in yon paper-book as ever we hear in church. I’ve heard him pray uncommon fine—quite beyond any but learned folk.”

Mr. Bradshaw had been anxious to do something

to testify his respect for the woman, who, if all had entertained his opinions, would have been driven into hopeless sin. Accordingly, he ordered the first stonemason of the town to meet him in the chapel-yard on Monday morning, to take measurement and receive directions for a tombstone. They threaded their way among the grassy heaps to where Ruth was buried, in the south corner, beneath the great Wych-elm. When they got there, Leonard raised himself up from the new-stirred turf. His face was swollen with weeping; but when he saw Mr. Bradshaw he calmed himself, and checked his sobs, and, as an explanation of being where he was when thus surprised, he could find nothing to say but the simple words:

“ My mother is dead, sir.”

His eyes sought those of Mr. Bradshaw with a wild look of agony, as if to find comfort for that great loss in human sympathy; and at the first word—the first touch of Mr. Bradshaw’s hand on his shoulder—he burst out afresh.

“Come, come! my boy!—Mr. Francis, I will see you about this to-morrow—I will call at your house.—Let me take you home, my poor fellow. Come, my lad, come!”

The first time, for years, that he had entered Mr. Benson’s house, he came leading and comforting her son—and, for a moment, he could not speak to his old friend, for the sympathy which choked up his voice, and filled his eyes with tears.

THE END.]





